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Buddhist nyat and Christian Apophaticism
A Typology of Negativity with Special Reference to Derridean Khôra and Différance

Willis, Iii, James Edward

Awarding institution:
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Author: James Willis, Iii

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***Buddhist Śūnyatā and Christian Apophaticism:
A Typology of Negativity with Special Reference to
Derridean Khôra and Différance***

Submitted by James Edward Willis, III

To satisfy the requirements of the programme for Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology

King's College London

Abstract

Within the field of comparative religion, the methodological problem of comparing traditions that differ in their histories, theologies, and linguistic constructs persists. Rather than immediately establishing a cognitive bridge between two differing traditions, this study adopts the approach that a typology, specifically a typology of negativity, allows for a nuanced analysis into the comparative possibilities in Buddhism and Christianity. Within the larger scope of a typology of negativity, the teaching of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, is examined in various traditions to have a better understanding of how it informs Buddhism; in a similar way, apophatic theology is examined in Christianity in order to show how it informs Christian thought. What binds these two traditions together herein is not a generalized or anecdotal connection, but rather a commitment to negativity, to examining how negation works in the language of these two traditions. The typology of negativity allows for a very specific “route” with which to establish a context of comparison. However, neither the typology nor the examination of negativity through emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity are enough to support a full comparison. An analytical bridge fills out the typology of negativity to help bring the concepts together and, more importantly, to find new comparative routes within the traditions themselves. This is attempted with Derridean deconstruction, specifically through *différance* in Buddhist emptiness and *khôra* in Christian apophaticism. Derridean *différance* and *khôra* provide a fluid language whereby problems of binary oppositions are bracketed and examined within the specific structures of sacred texts within the traditions. Furthermore, Derridean deconstruction provides the crux of the analytical argument because a deconstructed language of negativity, as it applies to a specific context within Buddhism and Christianity, opens new avenues of analysis and comparison.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Typology, Methodology, and Review of Literature

The prospect of comparing two world religions is both exciting and daunting as an academic pursuit: it is exciting because of the possibility of dialogue across multiple times, societies, languages, and belief systems; for this same reason it is daunting. At best, a comparison might offer up a specific context and then analyze components within that context in hopes of finding some commonality for further examination. However, even this endeavor is limiting, not only in contexts, but also in how far a methodology might be employed to show similarities, philosophical nuances, and points of comparison. In some sense, a new methodology must be set forth in each comparison to match the context; an overall, “universal” methodology of comparison, while certainly worthwhile and potentially viable, is probably, in the final analysis, not very beneficial. The problem here is with not what is *gained* by a comparison, but what is *lost*.

Beyond the generalities and anecdotal evidence of commonalities in two religious traditions, the real potential for deep and meaningful comparison is certainly possible.¹ However, the potential for a compromise or loss of data in order to articulate that comparison is also something to consider. The problem, framed in terms of religious study, is that when one asserts a specific voice, such as an “authoritative” religious worldview or theological position, it is to silence other (heterodox, for example) voices. Historically, though, a

¹ Texts approaching the topic of comparative religion often make fairly sweeping generalities about the possibilities; for example, Kenneth Kramer frames his project this way: “Each culture tells stories of the highest and deepest truths known to humankind in its scriptures...Comparing sacred traditions, we see that they share similar development from sacred events to sacred stories to sacred texts which then serve as conduits for sacred teachings.” Kenneth Kramer, *World Scriptures: An Introduction to Comparative Religions* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 10. While this certainly may be true, the operative methodology with which Kramer utilizes is to select certain key elements in various sacred texts for comparison. While there is nothing inherently wrong with that approach, it must be asked if this is holistic enough to match the claims. Others, like Kedar Nath Tiwari take up a “scientific” way of viewing comparative religion, albeit in a way that is “detached.” Again, while there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, like all scientific approaches, one asks what is gained and, more importantly, lost, in such an approach. If two religions are compared “scientifically,” what critical remarks remain unexamined between the two? For if the scientific approach takes its own method seriously, certain aspects of the analysis go untreated. See Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 1ff.

religious tradition, especially one that spans the millennia of human history, is made up of multiple competing voices; the goal of any viable religious description is one that tries to mitigate those competing voices into something of an organic, living, breathing tradition. This is no easy task; the problem is compounded when working with two traditions. The attempt to find common ground, something that goes beyond the anecdotal, general, or happenstance, could be exceedingly difficult. To refine the question of what is gained versus what is lost, it might be said that the act of comparing means picking and choosing sources whereby something is always lost.

There is a need for a methodology that takes these criticisms seriously with a very specific context, whilst remaining open to competing voices, traditions, and worldviews within a tradition. Even then, however, the question must be posed as to whether two religious traditions might dialogue without a bridge, a separate point of connectivity, a voice that has no affiliation either way. Is there room for conducting religious comparison with a separate analytical point with which to bridge the conversation?

This project tries to take the above criticisms seriously, applying a methodology to a specific context, and then using a separate analytical point to attempt to bridge the dialogue. The two religious traditions examined herein are amongst the world's most ancient and influential traditions, Buddhism and Christianity. To frame a more specific context, the Buddhist teaching of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, is examined in various traditions to gain a better understanding of how it informs the larger tradition. Likewise, apophaticism, or negative theology, is examined in Christianity in order to show how it informs Christian thought. What binds these two traditions together here is not a generalized or anecdotal connection, but rather a commitment to negativity,² to examining how negation works in the language of

² While possible nuances of “negativity” are addressed below, the working definition here is that which is expressed through negative language. The larger point is to examine negative language in religious traditions to see how it functions on/in teachings of emptiness and apophaticism.

these two traditions. This commitment to negativity, as such, is formed with a typology of negativity; this allows for a very specific “route” with which to establish a context of comparison. However, neither the typology nor the examination of negativity through emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity are enough to make a full comparison. An analytical bridge is needed to help bring the concepts together and, more importantly, to find new “routes” within the traditions themselves. This is attempted with Derridean deconstruction, specifically through *différance* in Buddhist emptiness and *khôra* in Christian apophaticism. From here, a deconstructed language of negativity as it applies to a specific context within Buddhism and Christianity opens new avenues of analysis and potential comparison.

This chapter begins with an outline of a typology of negativity; this typology helps establish the parameters of analysis with which negativity is examined in the language of Buddhism and Christianity. Then, once the typology is in place, a methodology helps work out some of the technical components of the typology. The survey of literature helps situate this project within the frame of reference to previous research. The approach is multi-pronged insofar as it must address previous research in several different fields, but it also helps show the lack of research in this particular context.

Chapters Two and Three are an analysis of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism, respectively. One of the foundational ideas of this project is that religious traditions must be examined independently of each other, with their own unique vocabularies, in order to understand how a comparison might be possible. Thus, the examinations are kept separate purposely. Chapter Four then takes the Derridean idea of *différance* and applies it to Buddhist emptiness; this helps further examine the dynamics of emptiness in ways that open it to possible comparison. Chapter Five applies the Derridean reading of Plato’s *khôra* in a way to understanding Christian apophaticism in ways that might be comparable to Buddhism.

However, as a similar methodological tool in chapters Two and Three, of separate analyses for the expressed intent of preserving unique voices, Chapters Four and Five retain the separateness of religious traditions, too. Only in the concluding chapter do potential comparisons of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism emerge.

It is hoped that this project would fulfill several goals: to contribute to the dialogue of Buddhist and Christian communities who share different religious traditions, yet might come together for the betterment of humanity, to examine how Derridean deconstruction might contribute to religious language and inquiry, and to add to the body of literature that exists in this particular paradigm.

While the form and structure of this comparison may not reflect other comparative studies of Buddhism and Christianity, the intent is admittedly different with Derridean deconstruction. One of the more intriguing and difficult aspects of deconstruction is that it does not offer a third point with which to analyze, but rather it provides a means with which to bring together Buddhism and Christianity in alignment. This alignment means that what is unique in the traditions is preserved, but it also allows for deeper analysis. The hope here is to foster understanding of how studying two religions in alignment is beneficial and productive in a comparative way.

From here, it is now prudent to establish a typology of negativity, as this will provide a framework with which to begin a comparison of emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity.

A Typology of Negativity: Linguistic Contexts and Considerations

I. The Purpose of a Typology

Various fields use the term “typology” to refer to a classification system, a method by which language structures are broken down for further analysis. The intent here is not to establish a field-specific typology (such as an anthropological, biblical, or grammatical

typology), but rather to establish a way in which negative language, expressed in types of negativity, might be analyzed in religious traditions. The problem of languages utilized in this analysis of Buddhism and Christianity, including Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese, Japanese, Middle High German, mediaeval Latin, and French, the language of Derridean deconstruction, coupled with the complexities of writing this typology in English, all contribute to the astounding difficulty of such an analytical task. The purpose here is not to invent a typology that can adequately correspond to the specific linguistic needs, but rather to find commonality in the negative types in these religious traditions. Thus, this typology is specifically geared toward negativity in these traditions; it recognizes the distinct contexts, languages, and nuances of each of these traditions, but in this recognition, it is able to sort through the deeper differences, and even similarities, of the examined traditions.

Specifically, the types examined include how negativity is communicated,³ the signification of negativity,⁴ and how negativity can be a critique of authoritative sources. The purpose of setting up a typology of negativity is to identify the tension between what is speakable and unspeakable. This is fundamentally paradoxical because the recognition that the unspeakable must remain unspoken is readily acknowledged; however, a typology of negativity might contribute to defining *what* is fundamentally unspoken. Furthermore, the generalized question of whether or not it is possible to express negativity is bracketed because within each tradition, negation has a paradoxical relationship with language, with theological and philosophical categories, and with the experiential.

³ While this is discussed below, it is important to note here that “communication” indicates that which language seeks to make known. The larger point here is how negativity, that which is non-communicable, might be expressed with paradoxical language.

⁴ Using a phrase like “signification of negativity” encapsulates something of the slipperiness of language: what does it mean to signify that which negates? As it is used here, the signification employed is that of negation, that which negates language and meaning, and that which cannot be “signified” as such. So, while a bit of a misnomer, perhaps, “signification of negativity” is recognized as faulty and inadequate, but it is an attempt at expression.

II. The Functionality of Negation

What makes the task of writing on or about negativity difficult is its function within language. Negation does not seem to stand alone in meaning, but rather as that which functions *on* other words. The negative component of a sentence, whether in noun, verb(al), or gerund form seems to “tear down” other words’ meaning. This is exactly the analytical value. Negative words function in an almost parasitic way: they do not signify, as such, on their own, but rather they need the presence of other words to change signification.

The point of this project is to assess, contextualize, and situate how negation works in/on/through religious language to allow for a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism. This takes into consideration the fact that negativity may function at many levels of signification within meaning, but that it also acts as a parasite of sorts. This is the fascinating component of the functionality of negativity in religious inquiry: how does meaning shift with the “presence” of “absence” in language? This allows for a less constrictive analytical process by which to examine the types of negativity and how they might be applied to comparative religion.

III. A Typology of Negativity for Comparative Religious Studies

The difficulty with comparing two different world religions was briefly outlined; the major point to emerge from that discussion is the identification of not what is gained by comparison, but what is lost. This certainly applies to a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism because while the terms may share some commonality, especially in linguistic functionality upon the internal logic of the tradition, they are not equivalent. How much is compromised by analytically engaging both traditions in the language of emptiness and apophaticism? The idea here is a typology of negativity will establish types of negativity in a way that will limit what is lost through linguistic compromise.

A. Types of Negativity

One of the central goals of this project is an examination of language, specifically negative language, in Buddhism and Christianity. In order to do that, three types of negativity are established to not only draw particular analytical parameters, but also to tease out a method by which negative language is examined in light of its function in the tradition. The problems of this analysis have been highlighted somewhat already: expressions of negativity appear self-defeating and contradictory because whatever is being expressed is also being un-expressed in favor of something else, or “other.” Thus, the first problem, herein defined as a type of negativity, is with communication of how negativity is expressed. Another problem has to do with signification because the full spectrum of emptiness and apophaticism means quite different things across religions that span over two-thousand year histories; hence a type of negativity must take into consideration the problem of meaning, of what exactly is being signified. Thirdly, negativity may function as a qualifier of language that is meant to express religious authority. This means that religious language assumes a certain privilege of authority over other competing voices; negativity functions as a type of skepticism of that authority, a question to a particular authoritative privilege.

i. The Communication of Negativity

The point and purpose of language is communication; the communication of negativity presents something of a challenge simply because it is a negation of its own object. In a contextual frame, this begs the question of the limits of language: How do words function within a particular grammar or within a particular context of meaning? Secondly, can these questions be explored in finite space and time? Operating at the limits of language, Derridean deconstruction helps with the problem of communication of negativity. What

might be referred to as “parasitic language,”⁵ the function of negativity in language is undertaken with special reference to Derridean deconstruction, namely in the examination of difference/*différance* and *khôra*.

Within the subtext of communication, the problem of experience also presents some special considerations. Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism are often described, in both primary and secondary literature, in terms of experience of adherents; thus, there are experiential aspects of this context which must be identified. Specifically, within a type of negativity, experience of emptiness or apophaticism might be summed as a stripping away of assumptions or idolatries, as the exposure of a reality beyond reality. However, again, deconstruction helps clarify this context through the critique of hyperessentiality, or of a presence beyond presence; this brings together how the communication of emptiness and apophaticism is met with the experience of adherents.

ii. Signification and Negativity

In over two-thousand years of religious history, Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism have taken on many different meanings; thus, when applying negativity to signification, the total picture of what is meant is not entirely clear. In other words, if negativity is a method by which emptiness and apophaticism are examined, signification becomes a problem because it cannot encapsulate the entire tradition and the possibilities of what it could mean. Additionally, to go a bit deeper with this problem, when a negative qualifier is put to a signified word (un/non/no), does this change the designation of meaning for the object, or does it offer an entirely new meaning? While this problem may appear grammatically pedantic, the problem magnified to the level of religious comparison could spell trouble. For example, if emptiness in Buddhism means the non-substantiality of all

⁵ An explanation of these terms is filled out more below, but what is called “parasitic” here is that which alters and shifts language; this has a certain methodological significance because it alters the function of language. In this case, deconstruction helps show the function of negativity.

things, does this mean that no-thing/nothing has substance or that all substances have no-thing(s)/nothing?

The problem of signification, when applied to negativity, helps sharpen the horizon of what is being discussed because it requires articulate language to convey how negativity affects, or is affected by, emptiness or apophaticism. This is also where Derridean deconstruction will help with the analysis because difference/*différance* and *khôra* address the problem of signification and emptiness.

iii. Negativity as Critique of Authority

Religious writing, herein clarified as writing that constitutes sacred scriptures for a religious tradition, assumes a particular authority, a place of privilege in conveying meaning. This is necessary for the development and proliferation of a world religion, but textual analysis begs the question of *a priori* authority over meaning. As Derridean deconstruction will demonstrate, this assumed authority of religious texts is such because other competing voices have been silenced through the ages; they, too, make-up the character, tenor, and voice of a religion, if even as heterodox voices. However, negativity helps open up the discussion, the plethora of voices, the competing constructs of religious conversation. This is not a critique of authority, as such, but a breaking-open of the normal textual boundaries meant to preserve an authoritative privilege.

Thus, this approach to a typology is important to develop as a textual undertone to this project because it “allows” negativity to break open the bounds of textual authority in emptiness and apophaticism.

B. A Typology of Negativity

To sum up so far, the thrust of this project is to establish how types of negativity might allow for an examination of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition and apophaticism in the Christian tradition. The three-pronged approach to negativity, namely in delineating out

how negation is communicated, how negativity is signified, and how negativity calls authoritative sources into question, is underscored by an examination of Derridean deconstruction, namely that of difference/*différance* and *khôra*. The threefold approach, while not specifically delineated as such in the work below, is addressed in various forms in the major chapters below. This approach is specific because the intent is to create an ebb and flow, of sorts, in order to build a specific context of negativity. However, while the typology is essential to the framework of this project, it does not answer methodological questions or address how this is carried out. A methodology that addresses how the two traditions can be examined while preserving their individual voices is necessary.

Methodology

I. Setting the Context

The purpose of this project is to examine emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity through the lens of different types of negativity. These types have been identified as the communication of negativity, the signification of negativity, and the question of authority when negativity is employed. Now the question remains of *how* this will be undertaken; first, though, certain considerations have to be made prior to the establishment of a clear methodology. These considerations must be examined thoroughly prior to the development of a methodology because they shape and form how the analysis will progress.

A. General Problems with Comparing Religious Traditions

The comparison of two or more religions is highly problematic due to social, philosophical, anthropological, and theological difficulties in methodology, evidence, and interpretation. Thus, care must be instituted, not only in these particular issues, but also in how the subject is approached, in order to establish something more precise and meaningful than cursory comparison. Specifically, as it applies to this study, it is not inherently logical to compare two traditions that developed and flourished independently of one another; even

more, the differences that separate Buddhism and Christianity span geographical, philosophical, and theological differences. It must be stated from the outset that comparison between these two traditions must bear in mind these difficulties. Hajime Nakamura notes the difficulty in comparing Christianity and Buddhism:

In my opinion comparison of Buddhism as a whole with Christianity is not easy. The attempt may not lead us to conclusions which are convincing to everybody. Both religions have long histories. They have spread across vast areas covering a number of continents. To understand either of them completely is impossible.⁶

While conclusions may not have to be “convincing to everybody,” they should be able to argue for meaningful dialogue between the two traditions. Nakamura goes on to argue that a thoroughgoing historical analysis may contribute to the dialogue of comparison because “[t]he development of religious faiths, and the special characteristics they reveal during different ages, stem from the fact that conditions do not remain strictly the same.”⁷ While this is certainly relevant, and Nakamura goes on to explain *how* this is relevant, other paradigms may be present to explore certain characteristics of both religions.

Malcolm David Eckel proposes that both “traditions reinforce each other, in other ways they fundamentally conflict. But from the sense of incongruity, of close kinship against a background of radical discontinuity, comes the chance of new insights.”⁸ The tension Eckel highlights is important, at least to general remarks about the task of comparison: the possibility of comparison is important, but the identification of points of tension between the traditions may even yield more interesting results.

The central problem is that any comparison risks overgeneralization at best and irrelevance at worst. This is the reason why a typology of negativity is useful: it allows for a

⁶ Hajime Nakamura, “Paradigm Shifts: Buddhism and Christianity Compared,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 6 (1986): 5.

⁷ Ibid. 6.

⁸ Malcolm David Eckel, “Emptiness and the Historical Process: A Historian’s Response to the Image of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Works of John Cobb and George Rupp,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 3 (1983): 7.

particular framework and engages the discussion within particular points of engagement. Inasmuch as a comparison might be fruitful and interesting, it does not give substantive reason why it is useful; the reason given here for consideration is that of inter-religious dialogue.

B. Religious Dialogue as a Reason for Comparison

In a world that becomes ever-increasingly aware of various cultures, societies, and religions, the importance of dialogue becomes more and more vital. David Chappell remarks that Buddhist-Christian dialogue is a relatively-new endeavor that has vast consequences: “...what is new during the past century is the promotion of interreligious dialogue as a necessary spiritual task to nurture social harmony and the well being of the global community.”⁹ Winston King comments on this new phenomenon of peaceful dialogue between religious traditions:

In the ages-long history of interreligious contacts, ‘dialogue’ – as a friendly interchange of views on some other topic or other – has been almost unknown. Confrontation, of various sorts and intensities, has been the more usual mode of interreligious relationship.¹⁰

Religious dialogue as such may provide for common characteristics, informed discussion, and increased sensitivity to differences. Robert A. Segal outlines these general thoughts as a comparative method:

⁹ David Chappell, “Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community,” in *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Honor of Frederick J. Streng*, ed. Sallie B. King and Paul O. Ingraham (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 9.

¹⁰ Winston L. King, “Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Honor of Frederick J. Streng*, ed. Sallie B. King and Paul O. Ingraham (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 41. King goes on to outline a method of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, offering the following criteria: “...dialogue implies much more than a ‘friendly’ and tolerant exchange of religious views by the adherents of two or more religious faiths who haven’t the slightest intention of changing their pre-dialogue faith stance a hairsbreadth. There must be at least some readiness to accept change, perhaps that of a fundamental sort.” Ibid. 47-48. In a separate article, King explains why dialogue has met with resistance in the Christian tradition until recently: “Christianity, with its well-defined doctrinal base and rigid organization, has usually viewed proposed concessions as destructive of the True Faith.” Winston L. King, “Response to David Chappell,” in *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Honor of Frederick J. Streng*, ed. Sallie B. King and Paul O. Ingraham (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 36.

Indeed, to compare phenomena is *necessarily* to find differences as well as similarities. Even if one were *seeking* only similarities, one could know that one had found them all only at the point at which no further differences could be converted into similarities. Consequently, one can as readily use the comparative method to find differences as use it to find similarities.¹¹

Furthermore, though religious dialogue may point out similarities between religious traditions, a deeper appreciation for differences may also drive a discussion.

It is expressly the point of this analysis to engage the Christian and Buddhist traditions in a dialogue because “[c]onceptual clarification of religious perspectives is important for both traditions.”¹² The goal is to allow each tradition to speak in its own lexicon, with its own varying theologies and philosophies. Thus, comparative remarks are only attempted after both religions are expressed with independent analysis.¹³ From the outset, the comparative method contained in this analysis seeks to take seriously the problem of “differentiat[ing] religions” without “level[ing] them.”¹⁴ In this strain of thought, Alice Keefe offers particular insight into the implications of establishing a comparative method: “...the tension between interreligious dialogue and the academic study of religion is rooted in the conflict between normative and descriptive approaches to the study of religion...”¹⁵ She also offers a generalization of the comparative method that is a driving force behind this analysis: “[comparison between Buddhism and Christianity] opens a space to dive deep into questions about what it means to be human on the most profound level.”¹⁶

¹¹ Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” *Numen*, vol. 48., no. 3 (2001): 348-349. Italics original.

¹² Leo D. Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 194.

¹³ This method of analysis is utilized in direct contrast to some thinkers who compare Christianity and Buddhism. For example, Hajime Nakamura attempts to write a historical comparison about the development of Buddhism and Christianity. Both religions are expressed in a parallel way that almost blurs the differentiation between the two. Simply put, Christianity and Buddhism have fundamentally different histories; comparisons of the two seem to hold them together, philosophically and theologically, at particular junctures of time. This method is rife with potential errors and oversimplifications. Nakamura, “Paradigm,” 5-22.

¹⁴ Segal, “Defense,” 342.

¹⁵ Alice A. Keefe, “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, Interreligious Dialogue, and the Academic Study of Religion,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 18 (1998): 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Religious dialogue, kept within the particular methods of comparison in which similarities and differences are both honored for their value, can have important implications for not only academic study, but for cultural understanding in an ever-connected world.

Xinzhong Yao argues similarly:

To reduce hostility and misunderstanding, we have to initiate dialogue between different faiths. To initiate dialogue, we have to undertake comparative studies of the theories and practices of different religions, so that this dialogue may be meaningful and productive.¹⁷

José Pereira argues, "...both religions [Christianity and Buddhism]...admit, explicitly or implicitly, that such truth exists at least in a fragmentary state outside their institutional organisms. In other words, they combine the claim to absoluteness with a concern for ecumenicity."¹⁸ The purpose of comparing Buddhism and Christianity is thoroughly dialogue-based because the "plurality of religious worlds" in a "fragmented modern world" calls for meaningful discussion of particular doctrines in both traditions.¹⁹

C. A Comparative Framework: The Integrity of Individual Analyses

The integrity of a comparison between Buddhism and Christianity must be held together with the method of presenting each religion as a unique, individual tradition of not only an ancient culture and people, but also as a living tradition of modern adherents. As such, it is necessary to build a comparison that examines one specific component of the religion.

After emptiness is examined in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity, particular types of negativity are used to examine the similarities and differences in both traditions. This allows for the identification of anecdotal commonalities while balancing the potential for dialogue between traditions that have unique voices within their given philosophical and

¹⁷ Xinzhong Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁸ José Pereira, "Resonances of Buddhism and Christianity," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 16 (1996): 115.

¹⁹ Keefe, "Dialogue," 127.

theological presuppositions. Additionally, this addresses the problem of clearly seeing similarities and differences amongst both religions. As Yao offers,

The similarities between two religious traditions must be placed against the background of their differences. In one sense, their differences are more important for a comparative study than their similarities, because it is these differences that have led to two *different* traditions.²⁰

The comparative framework, established with the usage of a typology of negativity, allows for the integrity of both traditions to remain intact insofar as their fundamental teachings are not altered by the analysis.

D. Types of Comparisons: A Presence of Origins

Though this is not exhaustive of the types of comparisons, it is important to note an error that has preceded many comparative studies of Buddhism and Christianity. In many previous literatures, analysts seek to trace particular philosophical, linguistic, and historical elements of the religion back as far as possible with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) intent of finding some sort of point of origin. This point of origin, as the internal logic goes, would allow for an analysis that would self-justify the point of comparison. The error here is that this pre-supposes what Derrida calls a “presence of origins”²¹ because it assumes some sort of common ground that can be “found” if one traces an element or various elements far enough back. An additional error of logic here is such studies are logically self-fulfilling in their conclusions; if some overall general point of comparison is made, it is cited as justification for the comparison *in the same way* that the comparison justifies the point of origin. The critique here is that the justification for comparison should be made outside of the possibility of a point of origin.²²

²⁰ Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 12. Italics original.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “Ellipsis,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295.

²² In this project, the justification given is the possibility of inter-religious dialogue as means for better understanding between the religious traditions.

This project does not pre-suppose the presence of origins, of some point where Buddhism and Christianity meet on demonstrably common ground. As the need for independent analysis between the traditions has already been argued at length, here it is met with the understanding that a point of origin is not presupposed; no matter how Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism may be traced, it is not held that there is some point whereby the analysis might end or conclude with some evidence. Rather, the point is that the analysis is ongoing, even beyond the limitations of space and time in this project. To that end, this comparison, as it is met in this space and time, is readily acknowledged to be limited in scope, possibility, and suggestion; however, it is hoped that such limitations allow for fruitful dialogue in *this* space and time.

II. A Methodology of Comparison

A. Independent Religious Traditions and a Convergent Typology

As previously argued, it is important for any comparison to begin with specifically outlining the parameters of each position. In this case, an examination of Buddhist emptiness, as understood through a more precise understanding of negativity (and its relational qualities) must be presented completely differently than an examination of Christian apophaticism, as understood through its own understanding of negativity (and its relational qualities). The two traditions, if they stand a chance of meaningful comparison at some point, must be presented independently of one another in order to establish and maintain credible arguments. Furthermore, because both traditions resist definitions of emptiness and apophaticism as part of their own internal logic, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of describing a quality that is important to paradigmatic understanding (and thus circumspect in nature).

The emphasis on this point cannot be overstated. Independence within the two traditions must be preserved in order to maintain an objective coherence within the study. As Keefe argues,

Scholarship is always a matter of interpretation, and interpretation is always conditioned by particular interests and orientations; thus credibility in cross-cultural study depends not upon freedom from any interest, but upon the capacity to be as conscious as possible of one's particular standpoint...²³

Thus, objectivity demands recognition of "interests and orientations," not just on the personal level, but also on the institutional level. This objectivity is achieved in the methodology through independent examination of "interests and orientations" of each religion in its relation with emptiness and apophaticism.

This particular approach addresses not only institutional concerns, but also individual (personal) interactions with these religions. Chappell comments on the unifying purpose of conducting the comparisons: "...differences between religious people are real...there is a higher truth that all religions refer to, and it is in this truth that all religions are united."²⁴ This unification of religious dialogue is made possible through independent viewpoints.

Independent examination takes seriously the purpose of studying religions, and furthermore, the purpose in offering suggestions as to particular comparisons. As Stephen Morris comments,

Religion is generally thought of as a social phenomenon. In fact, it is usually even defined as such, referring to the acts and symbols shared by a group. Yet some feel that in its purest form religion should be understood as an individual matter, and if it entails anything at all, what it sets on foot is an intense, personal search for the deepest meaning in life.²⁵

²³ Keefe, "Dialogue," 125.

²⁴ Chappell, "Dialogue," 14.

²⁵ Stephen Morris, "Buddhism and Christianity: The Meeting Place," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 19 (1999): 23.

This “intense search for the deepest meaning in life” drives the reason for comparison, as well as the greater goal of inter-religious dialogue.²⁶ Thus, the need for independent evaluations of the two religions is not only for institutional purposes, but also to address the personal nature of the tradition.

B. Typological Comparisons: Convergence of Traditions

Bringing together the Buddhist and Christian traditions requires the elements listed above, beginning namely with independent examination. However, to progress to a meaningful comparison, a pre-existing framework, in this case a typology of negativity, must exist in order to bring the traditions together in one particular element. The purpose of using a typology for comparison is, hopefully, to create a framework of examination of emptiness insofar as the typology may suggest ways forward in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Furthermore, the more precise reasons behind using a typology for these types of suggestions are to address “many a metaphysical question [that] still haunts academic comparisons and the approach of a history or phenomenology of religions. What, after all, is to be made of the insistence of the ‘truth’ of the respective teachings?”²⁷

What is presented with the typology is not a “convergence” in the sense of blurring together religious traditions. Rather, the typology of negativity allows for a discussion of independent elements, coupled with discussion of how these elements bear meaning in similar philosophical and theological terms. The problem of language remains, however.

Leo Lefebure suggests the problem of language in relation to Buddhist-Christian dialogue:

Both traditions are aware...that human language cannot express the full meaning of these perspectives. For both traditions, religious language must in

²⁶ Yao makes an interesting point here; this sums up well the problem with individual “objective” comparisons of religion: “A qualified comparison between religions must be based on the principle of impartiality...Hermeneutical theory has moved beyond the liberal or enlightenment idea of objectivity and come to the realization that there is no value-free interpretation.” Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 4.

²⁷ John C. Maraldo, “The Hermeneutics of Practice in Dōgen and Francis of Assisi,” *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingraham and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 54.

some way be negated in order to fulfill its purpose and communicate the truth of ultimate reality.²⁸

Lefebure's point suggests a systematic problem with any comparison between the two traditions. In order for the typology to meaningfully address a point of comparison of emptiness through negativity requires an independent philosophical tool that has the capability of understanding each religion on its own terms, enables a comparison to develop its own language free of particular baggage, and uses this own language to suggest ways forward. In this project, Derridean deconstruction allows for such a bridge.

C. Jacques Derrida: Re-Creating the Language of Comparison in a Typology

The problem with any comparison, especially a comparison between vastly differing religions, is with language.²⁹ What stereotypes, generalizations, and oversimplifications come about when a comparison is conducted? As Yao summarizes, "...we must acknowledge that it is dangerous to identify religious expressions in one religion with apparently similar expressions in another, without careful comparison and proper criticism."³⁰

The problem of language is central to any comparison; it takes on its own unique problems when religions are compared. Addressing this problem from the outset means using a typology to compare elements in their own terms with a further clarification. In this case, the problems with comparing emptiness in the Buddhist and Christian traditions is recognized, thus a typology of negativity is used to further explore any possible comparisons. However, even within the typology, there are problems of language.

²⁸ Lefebure, *The Buddha and The Christ*, xxi.

²⁹ The even larger problems with language might be called categorical issues. Language is more specific, but even categorical problems are certainly possible. As John Cobb comments, "Christian theology is deeply affected by the encounter with Buddhism, and the comparative study of these two traditions is deeply informed by theological categories and concerns." John B. Cobb, Jr., "Epilogue," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingraham and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 231.

³⁰ Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 12.

The work of Derrida has importance to the problems outlined above in the sense that it suggests ways forward in a comparison of the two traditions. Granted, Derrida's work was not in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, but the methodology of deconstruction is invaluable for a meaningful comparison. Introductory remarks are made below to illuminate the general idea of how Derrida's thought is utilized as a cognitive bridge between the Christian and Buddhist traditions.

i. Derridean Deconstruction

While it might seem unusual to apply deconstruction to a discussion of religious comparison, Derridean *différance* and *khôra* contribute significantly to a dialogue of how negativity functions in religious language. G. Douglas Atkins offers a cogent working definition of deconstruction: "Unlike most other ways of reading, which tend to spatialize texts, deconstruction too traces a temporal movement, exposing the text's instability, the temporal impossibility of signifier and signified, of literal and figurative, of performative and constative ever to catch up with one another and to coincide."³¹ The structure of negation within religious language often has profound meanings upon the texts, and even further meaning for the tradition as a whole. What deconstruction "does" is allow an analysis to sort through the construction of negativity within the text; in this way, the religious text is no different than any other text. For example, *différance* in Buddhist emptiness shows how the non-substantiation of all things is foundational to other Buddhist teachings; in the same way, *khôra* in Christian apophaticism shows how the space of negation is central to discussion of how Christians speak of God.

Deconstruction is helpful because it helps address a central goal of the typology: the authority of the religious text is held in question because it no longer possesses a presumed

³¹ G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction / Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 10.

authoritative “voice” of a “sacred” text. Deconstruction is, in other words, an equalizer amongst texts, religious texts included.

As the possibility of comparing Buddhism and Christianity at some preconceived origins has been eliminated from the field of possibility, it is important to note which “elements” of deconstruction are used. While there are a plethora of possibilities which might yield interesting analyses, the two selected, *différance* in Buddhist emptiness and *khôra* in Christian apophaticism, represent how various contexts within negativity in these two traditions might be approached.

ii. Negativity in/on the Texts: Derrida as a Neutral Voice

An important aspect to the comparison here is a sense of detached neutrality that acts as a bridge between the two traditions. Derrida does not demonstrate any particular favoritism for a particular religious tradition; rather, he seems to be far more concerned with the language of religion, or that which is pre-supposed to have “presence” where there is but absence. While Derrida’s concerns might be thoroughly metaphysical, they are still neutral insofar as examining Christian apophaticism and Buddhist emptiness.

This neutrality is important as deconstruction acts as a foil of sorts for how negativity works within the typology. The deconstruction of emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity yields an important connection that can only be made after such an analysis, termed “negative transcendence,” though this is accomplished through using deconstruction as a foil to set up how negativity acts in religious language. Thus, methodologically, neutrality in the bridge between the traditions is necessary to show a connection.

III. A Typological Inquiry: What are the Outcomes?

Any comparison of such diverse and different traditions as Christianity and Buddhism must rest with suggestions of how they may be compared, what may be similar in the traditions, and how the traditions fundamentally differ. The outcomes of any comparison,

therefore, are suggestions to further dialogue, critique, and refinement. This study is no different. By setting out the task of comparing apophaticism in Christianity and emptiness in Buddhism with a typology of negativity, further brought together with Derridean deconstruction, a comparison of the two traditions may suggest further paths in dialogue. The outcomes of such a task are measured in the logic of the comparison, the strength of the typology as it is used as a comparative tool, and whether particular comparisons can be argued cogently. However, the reality of such an undertaking is kept within the context of certain problems: “Dialogue is important for both traditions’ self-understandings in the global community, but genuine understanding is difficult because of the very different assumptions that Buddhists and Christians bring to their religious practices.”³²

Three proposals are listed below that act as internal measures of that argument; they are not conclusions, but rather general outcomes that will be carried through as the logical extension of the methodology.

A. Emptiness May Act as a Tool to Bring Together Differing Traditions

It is all too easy to make overgeneralizations when it comes to comparisons; that may occur in a comparison of terminology, concepts, or dogma within the traditions. Thus, a further comparative tool is needed to bring the traditions together constructively, on their own terms. The methodology of this project centers around the idea that emptiness and apophaticism may serve as a constructive tool to bring together Buddhism and Christianity. However, in order to actively avoid overgeneralization, this comparison is extended to include a typology of negativity within its range of comparison.

Part of the reason for using emptiness and apophaticism in this comparison is to propose that the analysis may open up other ways of comparison in inter-religious dialogue.

³² Lefebure, *The Buddha and The Christ*, xix.

These suggestions help frame the way a comparison is conducted as a primary reason to further the dialogue of these two religions.

B. Particular Negative Types within a Comparison: The Outcome

The purpose of using a typology in a comparison of two religious traditions is to maintain an internal logic that focuses on how particular types, concepts, and ideas may function to bring together further concepts. The typology focuses specifically on three guiding principles which act as an internal framework to conduct the analysis. The outcome of using the typology is a demonstration of how a framework may be used to show comparisons; further, the use of Derridean deconstruction helps bridge together the nuances of the language used within the typology.

The outcome of using a specific typology of negativity is a fleshed-out framework of how Christianity and Buddhism may be compared in terms of emptiness. Furthermore, the outcome of using a typology is a logically-demonstrated framework of how further dialogues may occur. This works within the larger framework of how King describes the realities of religious inquiry: “In religion one deals with the value and the meaning of human life; in it are found the deepest, highest, and most personal hopes, fears, and aspirations embodied in its beliefs, actions, and institutions.”³³

C. Mutual (Trans)Formation

The main purpose of using a typology of negativity is to meaningfully express how negative categories may be used in a comparison. It allows for meaningful analysis, specifically in the thread of deconstruction because of the possibility of further dialogue; is there possibility of external change through this dialogue? That might be, but perhaps the answer is more relevant to the internal changes. If there is value to be found in comparing two religious traditions, it is found in elucidating the possibility of mutual change, of greater

³³ King, “Interreligious,” 42.

understanding, of articulation of the ultimate and sublime: “Neither Buddhism nor Christianity is interested in simply describing realities external to us. Both are movements of transformation that seek to overcome suffering and to liberate us from the prisons in which we find ourselves.”³⁴

IV. How the Typology and Methodology Work Together

To this point, there are many constituent pieces that loosely fit together to form the framework of this project: emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity are examined through the roles of negativity in the given traditions; this is accomplished through a typology that identifies three specific types of negativity. The methodology acts as the backdrop to each of these components because it is “driven” by Derridean deconstruction; in sum, Derridean deconstruction acts a foil whereby types of negativity can be examined in religious language.

Both the typology of negativity and the methodology are necessary to 1. preserve the voice of each tradition as unique, 2. examine three different types of negativity as contextual components and 3. bring together Derridean deconstruction in a way that acts as a foil to an examination of negative language in the two religions. In some sense, the typology is part of the methodology (as a pre-cursor of sorts), but it is also important to note that the methodology is informed by the framework of the typology. Both are necessary components of this project, mainly to hold the comparison together in a coherent way.

At this point, the typology and the methodology are set-up, but a study of the current and previous research in this particular field is needed. This survey of literature is meant both to fill in some analytical gaps of the methodology and typology through a contextualization of the sources, as well as critically examine how research up to this point does not fully engage Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism in a comparative sense.

³⁴ Ibid.

Review of Literature

I. Context for a Review of Literature

With a typology of negativity and a methodology of comparison in place, a survey of literature that spans the boundaries of comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism, coupled with that of Derridean deconstruction, is necessary to fill out the framework of comparison.³⁵ This survey is meant to contextualize how these sources may engage with one another in a comparative sense. The organization of the survey is purposely open in order to cover the broadest amount of materials. Spanning primary and secondary extant literature, the survey is comprised of several major headings that are meant to generally contextualize.

The survey begins first with a discussion of the major work that has been done in Buddhist-Christian studies. This broad overview helps situate this project in and apart from those literatures.

II. Comparative Literature: Dialogue of Buddhism and Christianity

In the field of Buddhist-Christian comparative analysis, the emphasis on the primacy of mutual understanding through dialogue is apparent in most bodies of literature. The below discussion of these literatures seeks to highlight certain reoccurring themes, including the problems of language, God, and ultimacy with special regard to emptiness and apophaticism. These themes serve as a guiding framework to examine the past, recent, and perhaps future work of Buddhist-Christian comparison and dialogue.

A. The Possibility of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

Perhaps there are a multitude of reasons to conduct meaningful dialogue between religious traditions; the question at hand, though, is why should there be dialogue between

³⁵ As the range of topics present in this project is quite numerous, a completely exhaustive study of sources is not possible with limits of space of time. Rather, the scope of this section is limited to that of a survey of the most applicable sources to fill out the historical, philosophical, and linguistic concerns of this project.

Buddhism and Christianity? Though the traditions have had some historical contact, dialogue as a means of mutual understanding and sharing is a rather uniquely twentieth-century exercise.

To further the question, Paul Ingram and Frederick Streng outline the general understanding of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, insofar as it developed in the twentieth century. In sum, they arrive at an interesting analysis of the dialogue: “There are Buddhists and Christians who recognize that human life is at a new horizon of ethical, religious, and experiential possibilities, and that to make use of those possibilities the interchange between them must go beyond conflict, competition, or mere tolerance.”³⁶ They go on to provide a loose framework of possibility for the future of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, including one major, on-going goal: “...to explore both the difficulties and the possibilities of religious renewal and creative transformation which arise from the serious engagement with another ultimate claim.”³⁷

The value of Ingram and Streng’s analysis is found not only in a summation of the field up to the point of its publication, but also a vision via comparative framework of how future work could emerge in the field. They stress a common theme in the essays of “mutual transformation.” This is an important note in their study because it presents an attitude or mode of how they perceive comparative frameworks work best in a way that is sensitive to objective comparison, yet offers deeper insight into how traditions may inform one another.

David Chappell offers a brief history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, noting rather dryly, “...except for a few rare cases, traditional Buddhism was like other religions in not holding the idea of the equality of other religions until this [twentieth] century.”³⁸ He goes on

³⁶ Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng, “Religious Dialogue in the Twentieth Century: Issues, Approaches, and Possibilities,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 2.

³⁷ Ibid. 4.

³⁸ Chappell, “Dialogue,” 6.

to summarily detail the interreligious movement between the traditions, highlighting especially the use of emptiness with both traditions “tr[ying] to push beyond both traditions to seek what is common to human existence.”³⁹ Furthermore, in similar ways as other analysts, Chappell suggests that emptiness frames a comparison in a way that lends “mutual transformation.”⁴⁰

Chappell’s essay is a generalized history and engagement with the interreligious movement; his analysis serves the point of saying that “global community” is only possible through understanding. While he touches on emptiness as a possible connection between the traditions, he does not take this analysis very far. Rather, his point of interconnectedness amongst the two traditions serves as the impetus to stress the importance of the “global community.”

Winston King’s response to Chappell in many ways reflects the ultimate goal of Chappell’s appeal to productive dialogue within the two traditions. At times, King diverges from some of the particular nuances of Chappell, but the general appeal to working toward peaceful understanding of traditions is echoed clearly. In regards to emptiness as means of comparison, King tells of a conversation with D.T. Suzuki that, in many ways, reflects the traditional views of Buddhism in regards to being conversant with other traditions: “Suzuki once said in a conversation with me that the Western cross symbolized the need for the vertical Western ego to be flattened; the East, having no such sense of self (no-self, śūnyatā, of Buddhism) needed no cross.”⁴¹ King takes issue with this point of view, and goes on to discuss how a framework of mutual understanding can be quite beneficial to both traditions.

These sources tend to ground interreligious dialogue in a sense of ethics insofar as they impress upon the reader the convergence of twentieth-century communication

³⁹ Ibid. 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 15.

⁴¹ King, “Interreligious,” 53.

technologies with that of the possibility of cross-religious discussion manifesting itself in the reality of some sense of diplomacy. This is an important feature of the dialogue, but it does not go far enough: discussions that tend to take implicitly diplomatic ethical tangents seem to lose philosophical rigor; the internal logic, while centering on a human ideal, seems to escape the real work of comparisons. The importance of interreligious dialogue is not downplayed here, rather the intent is an appeal for a more specific context within the dialogue.

B. Emptiness as a Dialogue Partner

The task of interreligious dialogue is immensely complex; for this reason, the task is approached by academic specialists and practitioners carefully. Twentieth-century dialogue did well to establish points of departure within an ethical framework that stressed the value of diplomacy; while the dialogue, within the parameters of using topical analysis, was met with mixed success, the goal of identifying commonalities between human religious experiences was certainly progressed.

One of the points of juncture for Buddhist-Christian dialogue may be found in the concept of emptiness. Winston L. King, for example, explores the connection of emptiness and salvation in the Buddhist and Christian traditions; he takes seriously charges of Buddhist philosophy against Christianity:

Universal (Buddha) Mind swallows up individual, personal mind completely. Consequently the best counsel of both the Theravada and Mahāyāna Buddhist to the Christian world is that its illusory belief in selfhood, both human and divine, is what prevents Christianity from offering true salvation to humanity.⁴²

For King, though, emptiness offers a unique connection between the traditions through a proper understanding of transcendence.⁴³ In King's proposal, it is transcendence that allows "...the mind to transcend itself – but not self – that both Buddhism and Christianity seek to

⁴² Winston L. King, "No Self, No-Mind, and Emptiness Revisited," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 159.

⁴³ See *Ibid.* 163ff.

maximize and transform. They both seek a religious, that is, a *total* self-transcendence.”⁴⁴

King wants to go as far as to connect a path of transcendence with a proper understanding of emptiness in both traditions, but he instead offers the proposal of “personal” and “impersonal” understandings of emptiness.⁴⁵ The importance of King’s essay rests with his insightful way of bringing Christianity and Buddhism together with the method of emptiness and the ability of transformation through transcendence. Additionally, King holds a remarkable view of Christian selfhood against the charge of egoism by Buddhism:

...the hopefully asserted divine sonship of mankind occasionally enables the Western self to escape from its prison of static, closely confined individualism into the immensities of the unlimited and unlimiting love of God and persons; to lose its narrowness and tightness by being crucified with Christ and raised into a new and larger selfhood.⁴⁶

M. David Eckel begins his discussion of how Buddhist-Christian dialogue may be conducted with emptiness as its emphasis by summarizing the position of John Cobb: “...the realization of Emptiness allows one to become fully immersed in the historical process, to respond to it creatively, and to be fully appreciative of it at every moment.”⁴⁷ He goes on to describe how Cobb sees emptiness as a model of comparison because of the very difference in how a Christian approaches the notion of God where a Buddhist approaches the absoluteness of emptiness: “The Christian concept of God, in contrast, requires a person to conceive of the process as having a directional [d]uality or moral purpose not fully embodied in every moment.”⁴⁸

Eckel’s intention is to hold the differences between George Rupp and Cobb together in tension to show how a framework of dialogue emerges. For example, Eckel says, “It is more convincing...to see the pattern of balance between the negative and positive aspects of

⁴⁴ Ibid. 175. Italics original.

⁴⁵ See Ibid. 165ff.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 165.

⁴⁷ Eckel, “Emptiness and the Historical Process,” 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the Emptiness concept in the structure of systematic treatises rather than in individual verses extracted from a larger text.”⁴⁹ The tension present in their analyses centers on the dynamic power of emptiness; Eckel focuses on the transformative power of emptiness insofar as “[t]he understanding of Emptiness is embedded in a system oriented toward the service of others and it drives forward toward completion.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Eckel draws out Rupp’s and Cobb’s conclusion that emptiness serves as a point of dialogue between the traditions: “It is because all things are eternally empty that they can change, and it is because they can change that they are eternally empty.”⁵¹

A question rising from these discourses is whether these analyses go far enough; each speaks of potentialities within the study of emptiness, but they do not seem to venture into the possible outcomes of such study. While these works are more generalized and suggestive of future work, they lack in detailed analysis of how the dialogue may engage fully with Christianity and Buddhism. A notable exception to this occurred several decades ago; its well-documented exchange is worth noting in detail.

One of the most influential “movements” in the area of Buddhist-Christian dialogue occurred between 1980 and 1993 between the scholars Masao Abe and John Cobb, Jr.⁵² This dialogue established a documented connection between Buddhism and Christianity with the concept of emptiness. The reaction to this dialogue was mostly positive, though recent work by Charles Jones has cast doubt on the legitimacy of this dialogue for the reason that Abe used emptiness as emblematic of Buddhism (as a whole). However, despite recent criticism, the Abe-Cobb dialogue was certainly influential in the field.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 14.

⁵¹ Ibid. 18.

⁵² A good introduction to Masao Abe’s dialogue with John Cobb is found in Steven Heine’s forward in Masao Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), vii-x.

An important aspect of this dialogue is the emphasis that Masao Abe placed on *śūnyatā*, or emptiness. His understanding of the term comes from the Zen tradition, though he draws on multiple traditions of Buddhism to fully flesh out the term. Abe's emphasis on emptiness is best summarized in his own words: "...the future task of Buddhism is to break through the static view of *śūnyatā* and is to realize how this self-emptying Emptiness concentrates itself into a single centre in the boundless openness..."⁵³ Abe framed emptiness in a way that allowed it to be compared with other religious traditions; in his search for a hermeneutical link, he briefly discusses what *śūnyatā* means in the Buddhist tradition:

Śūnyatā as the ultimate reality in Buddhism literally means 'emptiness' or 'voidness' and can imply 'absolute nothingness.' This is because *śūnyatā* is entirely unobjectifiable, unconceptualizable, and unattainable by reason and will. It also indicates the absence of enduring self-being and the non-substantiality of everything in the universe. It is beyond all dualities and yet includes them.⁵⁴

An interesting note in this dialogue is Abe's dependence upon conceptualizing emptiness so that it may be used as a hermeneutical tool in comparison.⁵⁵ This may be an unfair critique, but Abe's definition and usage seem, at times, to conflict. This question is recently addressed with a connection between Abe's appeal to God who empties himself in Jesus and Buddhist emptiness: "Is there a genuine convergence between Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God? Abe believes so, but for the Christian theologian the question remains: Can Emptiness 'will' and 'love'?"⁵⁶ To that end, however, Abe is careful to frame his discussion as his

⁵³ Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), xix. Italics original.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Italics original.

⁵⁵ Masao Abe's reliance upon the teaching of emptiness is thoroughly documented in his *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1989) and *Zen and Comparative Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1996).

⁵⁶ Further clarification of this question is given: "That is, does the relation between Ultimate Reality and the human self involve the freedom of personal agencies, human and divine?" James Livingston, Francis Schussler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakley, and James Evans, Jr., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 487.

discussion of Buddhist emptiness itself remains intact; it is only in his comparative work that emptiness takes on meaning that contradicts his definition.⁵⁷

John Cobb's approach to dialogue with Abe is fundamentally through the belief that "all religions are involved in an on-going process of change throughout history, and that those win and survive in this competition who adjust to new situations, assimilating appropriately from others."⁵⁸ Thus, Cobb's engagement with Abe is grounded in the idea of "mutual transformation" because dialogue may have a profound effect on participants, and therefore entire traditions.⁵⁹ Cobb wants to push this far enough that it may be called post-dialogue because of the transformative effect of both traditions.⁶⁰ In his *Beyond Dialogue*, Cobb challenges usual notions of emptiness and seeks to open the discussion further.⁶¹ He proposes that emptiness is deeply rooted at the foundational level of Buddhism; as such, he refers to emptiness in very specific terms like "supreme reality" and "Emptiness-as-such."⁶²

Charles Jones takes issue with one of the fundamental aspects of the Abe-Cobb dialogue: "the adoption of Nāgārjuna as the standard-bearer for Buddhist thought, and Abe's idea of 'dynamic *śūnyatā*' as a natural outgrowth of the history of East Asian Buddhist thought."⁶³ He summarizes the goal of the dialogue:

⁵⁷ An example of this is in his treatment of Mahayana Buddhism: "In Mayahana Buddhism not only double negation concerning being – being as the negation of the negation of being – but also double negation concerning nothingness – nothingness as the negation of the negation of nothingness – is clearly realized." Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, 108.

⁵⁸ Tillman Vetter, "John B. Cobb, Jr., and the Encounter with Buddhism," in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Ferhout, and Anton Wessels (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 124. Vetter's essay is an excellent introduction to John Cobb's examination and appropriation of Buddhism in the early years of the dialogue.

⁵⁹ See John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982).

⁶⁰ This point is highlighted in a review of Cobb's book: Gordon Kaufman, "Toward a Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism. *Beyond Dialogue*" *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 3 (1983): 174.

⁶¹ See Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 110ff.

⁶² Ibid. 112. Cobb is criticized for this "reification" of emptiness in Kaufman's review. See Kaufman, "Toward a Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism," 175-176.

⁶³ Charles B. Jones, "Emptiness, Kenōsis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of 'Dynamic *Śūnyatā*' in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 24 (2004): 118.

The agenda, following Cobb's suggestion and vocabulary, was to allow each side to 'cross over' into the other; in other words, to study and internalize the worldview of the other in as much depth as possible without converting or losing one's connection with one's home tradition, abiding in the other side as a guest.⁶⁴

Jones goes on to argue that Abe presented a concept that, on the surface, seemed to coalesce well with Christianity, but further investigation shows this concept, while presented as an over-arching idea in Buddhism, is but a piece of the entire doctrine of emptiness.⁶⁵ Jones' convincing article argues vigorously for a renewed investigation into the nuances of using emptiness as a comparative tool. While his article is an attempt to show how Abe mistakenly simplified emptiness (and further propagated it as the sole teaching of Buddhist emptiness), and how Christian interpreters accepted this rather uncritically, in the final analysis it must be questioned whether Jones fully understands the nuanced views of their dialogue. While it is forthrightly admitted that the Abe-Cobb dialogue may have been hasty in places, the overall criticism of the dialogue seems a bit overreaching insofar as it is carefully and articulately nuanced.

The value in Jones' argument is found at the end where he presents a new way forward in Christian-Buddhist dialogue:

If anything, this small detail in the landscape of interreligious dialogue should caution today's participants against essentializing any religious tradition by identifying it in toto with one significant figure or text. While such a strategy is tempting...it is in fact untrue to the tradition and raises the likelihood of misapprehension of the dialogue partner's particular context and status.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid. 117.

⁶⁵ See especially pages 117-128. To summarize Jones' point: "Abe's idea of dynamic *śūnyatā*, which saw emptiness itself as a creative source of constant renewal in the cosmos that could be placed alongside the Christian God for comparison and possibly identification, arose from an East Asian Buddhist history that had for centuries been accustomed to thinking of truth as a living, dynamic force in the world. For him, it would have made perfect sense." Ibid. 127.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 131.

This is a helpful warning to heed; the simplification and generalization of any one tradition with all of its various complexities should be avoided. Rather, specific language is necessary to not only comprehend, but to further the method of dialogue.

The importance of the Abe-Cobb dialogue of the 1980's and early 1990's cannot be overstated in the field; the recent criticism of particular methodological specifics serves the greater purpose of clarifying the terminology employed. To this end, the use of emptiness as a methodological tool *should not be dispensed*; rather, reshaping and reforming terminology to better reflect the traditions as individual movements will authentically take the aforementioned criticisms seriously while building upon revised and critically-relevant theoretical constructs.

C. Christian God and Buddhist Ultimacy in Emptiness: Dividing Point or Bridge?

In terms of dialogue, it is tempting to connect two traditions' concepts of the ultimate together in a way that explores a commonality. Durwood Foster explores this possibility in the Christian ultimate, or God, and Buddhist Ultimacy, or emptiness. Foster begins his analysis of Buddhist-Christian dialogue by stating that a "dialogue of salvation" is "a sign of the rising awareness of common humanity that is an encouraging feature of our global scene today."⁶⁷ Foster's analysis of the reason to dialogue, as well as the reason to communicate differences and similarities across traditions, cuts deeper than other analyses. He indicates a pull to something deeper, something more meaningful: "Even where historical contact [between Christianity and Buddhism] was originally minimal, there are striking structural parallels among religions that unmistakably suggest homogeneity of underlying experience or

⁶⁷ Durwood Foster, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Current Sticking Points" *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 7 (1987): 151. His use of the phrase, "dialogue of salvation," is cited from Pope Paul II. He continues this introduction by stating, in a similar fashion to others, "There were never more compelling reasons...[to put] our *heads* and *hearts* together to reform mutually our ultimate concerns and commitments." Ibid. 152. Italics original.

archetypal mentality.”⁶⁸ Foster’s approach into comparative analysis via dialogue is shaped by this search for deeper meaning, for an “underlying experience;” however, his methodology of searching for “archetypal mentality” is not fully worked out. This begs the question of whether or not one could have epistemological evidence of commonality once particular nuances are brought out.

In his approach to emptiness, Foster focuses on the comparative value demonstrating, “...the Ultimate was *beyond* existence and non-existence, or beyond being and non-being...this was what is called an apophatic intuition of the Ultimate – an experience and conviction of the utter ineffability of the Ultimate.”⁶⁹ He goes on to explore the idea that Buddhist emptiness and the Christian apophatic tradition share some underlying meanings that are rich in comparative value.⁷⁰ He goes further than this, however, by suggesting, “...in addition to the *via negativa*, there is the *via analogica* or *symbolica*.”⁷¹ This is an important distinction because it provides more room to discover the possible connection between the Christian apophatic tradition and the Buddhist tradition insofar as symbols and analogies of emptiness may play a more emphatic role. His methods, though, may be questioned because the search for analogy and symbolism is, at its root, grounded in Christian medieval scholasticism. Does this communicate in the same language as Buddhist emptiness?

Foster moves his analysis into direct connections with emptiness by focusing on the direct tension between Christianity’s understanding of “God” and Buddhism’s understanding of “emptiness”: “...in a manner similar to that in which the Christ principle or Logos was read back or posited by Christian theology as belonging to very God of very God, Mahāyāna

⁶⁸ Ibid. 153.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 158. Italics original.

⁷⁰ See Ibid. 158ff. Specifically, Foster states, “This is the development of a *parallel* metaphysical and/or cosmological conceptuality which is used to translate or to ‘think,’ and thus also communicate (to non- or not-yet believers), the *meaning* of the concretely-named Biblical God.” Ibid. 159. Italics original.

⁷¹ Ibid. Italics original.

Buddhists read the Buddha principle into the ultimate emptiness.”⁷² Foster’s attention to these “two poles in the envisagement of Ultimacy” provide the backdrop necessary to tease out meaning in the comparison between “Ultimates” in both traditions.⁷³ He goes on: “...many would stop short of any merger, and say that Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and God are *two* ultimate paradigms, conceptually incompatible, both of which we *must* respect and may affirm...”⁷⁴ This is precisely the value in Foster’s insight: the tension of Ultimates in both traditions, held together, spell out an interesting framework of comparison; specifically in the tension of the two (God and emptiness) is this paradox examined. However, Foster’s argument does not dismantle the linguistic assumptions that affirm his appeal to “ultimates” in both traditions; does the signification he asserts as the ultimate concern take seriously the linguistic problems of the limitations of language? Or, is it possible to assert an ultimate with language?

In the same strain of thought, John and Denise Carmody examine the idea that the inexpressible nature of God in Christianity lends itself nicely to Buddhist emptiness: “...no matter what we say about God, God is more unlike than like our saying...A Christian theological sensibility is likely to love emptiness as akin to the *via negativa* that protects the mystery of God...”⁷⁵ The function of emptiness as a comparison between Christianity and Buddhism, namely the expressed notion of ultimacy, leads to a natural discussion of language insofar as its limitations are logically shown in this comparison. How does language form notions of God and emptiness?

D. The Language of Emptiness

The value of precise language simply cannot be understated for an authentic and meaningful Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Language plays a vital role in how concepts are

⁷² Ibid. 161.

⁷³ Ibid. 162. Italics removed.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 163. Italics original.

⁷⁵ Denise Carmody and John Carmody, *Serene Compassion: A Christian Appreciation of Buddhist Holiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 116.

examined, differentiated, and with special care, compared. Language is both a starting point and an ending point of dialogue simply because meanings are rooted in the role of linguistic communication.

Shohei Ichimura argues for religious dialogue that is grounded in linguistic study of Christianity and Buddhism, specifically in the linguistic understanding of *śūnyatā*, which best does “justice to the paradoxes of religious experience.”⁷⁶ He lucidly examines how *śūnyatā* may act as a conceptual bridge between Christianity and Buddhism because the “dialectic demonstrates that categories and systems are neither absolute nor ultimate precisely because they have neither self-identity nor any referential foundation.”⁷⁷ Ichimura’s essay is an important contribution to Christian-Buddhist dialogue because it connects how *śūnyatā* is a “definitive insight”⁷⁸ into Buddhist philosophy; moreover, he also points to how “...the concept of *śūnyatā* can allow us to analyze not only theistic and nontheistic religious systems, but also humanist and Marxist systems of teleology as well.”⁷⁹ The importance of *śūnyatā* is highlighted in Ichimura’s essay because it serves as the linguistic connection in how Christianity and Buddhism may be compared. While he presents a detailed and engaging logic syllogism for emptiness, he does not go far enough in his comparison with Christianity. While the point of his essay is clearly demonstrated in his framework, the question of how his particular nuances are held together begs many questions.

Leo Lefebure presents a model of comparison that takes seriously the role of dialogue: “Dialogue is important for both traditions’ self-understandings in the global

⁷⁶ Shohei Ichimura, “*Śūnyatā and Religious Pluralism*” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 112.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Ichimura goes further with this analysis: “Since this means a collapse of all symbolic systems, Nāgārjuna was in effect challenging his hearers to demonstrate exactly what is that enables our linguistic conventions to meaningfully function.” Ibid. 111.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 100. Ichimura goes on to spell out the further implications of *śūnyatā* in the Buddhist tradition: “...the Buddhist schools in general and the Mādhyamika school in particular, through the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, gave only limited recognition to the linguistic structuring of experience in their analyses of the phenomenal world, while at the same time denying any relevance whatsoever to language in relation to the Absolute.” Ibid. 103.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 100-101.

community, but genuine understanding is difficult because of the very different assumptions that Buddhists and Christians bring to their religious practices.”⁸⁰ Lefebure’s analysis seeks to fully grasp the specific difficulties he mentions; he begins with an important qualifier that is vital to productive dialogue: “Neither Buddhism nor Christianity is interested in simply describing realities external to us. Both are movements of transformation that seek to overcome suffering and to liberate us from the prisons in which we find ourselves.”⁸¹

Most critically to this analysis, Lefebure touches on the importance of understanding how language affects any comparison of Buddhism and Christianity: “Both traditions are aware...that human language cannot express the full meaning of these perspectives. For both traditions, religious language must in some way be negated in order to fulfill its purpose and communicate the truth of ultimate reality.”⁸²

While Lefebure does not directly address emptiness in his analysis, he goes on to affirm a framework of comparison that may be applied to how emptiness may be examined in both traditions: “For both the Christian and Buddhist traditions, the absolute, which is beyond all human images and concepts and comprehension, graciously responds to the human dilemma by making itself salvifically present in the world.”⁸³ If this applies to the two traditions, what Lefebure calls the “absolute” may be called paradoxical emptiness in both because they operate with an assumption of salvific power.

⁸⁰ Lefebure, *The Buddha and The Christ*, xix.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. xxi. Lefebure goes on: “While contemporary Christians can affirm that the reality that Christians name God is truly and redemptively present in the Buddhist tradition, it is nonetheless extremely important to remember that the ways in which Buddhists experience this incomprehensible reality are indeed very different from Christian experiences of God.” Ibid. xxii. This is an important observation because a central tenet of Christianity is grounded in the doctrine of God; Lefebure here tries to establish common ground between the traditions in order to continue dialogue where it may prematurely end.

⁸³ Ibid. 55. Lefebure continues: “While the creation of the universe through Christ is not the same as dependent co-arising of all realities, the two traditions do nonetheless offer a vision of a dynamic transformation of human life, a transformation which extends to the entire cosmos.” Ibid. 56. While presenting a framework of comparison, Lefebure rightly acknowledges the continued (and preserved) differences between the tradition.

E. Recent Work in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue with Respect to Emptiness

There is much recent literature that draws upon earlier work in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Recent literature tends to take a more specific approach to comparison and dialogue, as much of the older work focuses on the call to dialogue, approaches to dialogue, and common vocabulary. Recent work uses emptiness as a very specific hermeneutical dialogue piece, drawing upon the contextual foundation set in earlier work.

Joseph O'Leary explores the possibility of Buddhist-Christian dialogue that transcends the Christian attitude "of having secure possession of absolute truth."⁸⁴ His use of emptiness to bridge the gap with modern dialogue is done with numerous reservations:

An active and interventionist God is correlated with the breakthrough of ultimacy. Conversely, Buddhist emptiness acquires the associations of a powerful breakthrough, almost a theophany. This way of talking might be seen as falsifying both Buddhism and the Bible, by making emptiness an active power while reducing God to a mere impersonal ultimate.⁸⁵

O'Leary discusses the temptations to draw a reductionist comparison of emptiness in the two traditions; rather, his approach to dialogue advocates "...conventions pointing beyond themselves as they indicate their own emptiness."⁸⁶

In his specific analysis, O'Leary wants to find the bridge between what he draws together as Christian ultimate, or God, and Buddhist ultimate, or emptiness. He takes a similar interpretation as other Christian thinkers toward emptiness. Namely, without using the term "dynamic emptiness," he goes along similar lines: "In Madhyamika emptiness always has a conventional basis; it emerges in the analysis of this basis, and the emptiness itself is further analyzed so that it too is not allowed to congeal. Emptiness is always emptiness-

⁸⁴ Joseph S. O'Leary, "Emptiness and Dogma," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 22 (2002): 164.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 170.

⁸⁶ Ibid. O'Leary draws this together more closely: "How can emptiness be power? Perhaps the secret is that emptiness is the way things really are, so that to find it (or rather not find it) is to be put in energizing contact with the real. Emptiness is a way of living in the conventional world..." Ibid. 171.

of.”⁸⁷ He draws this together with the Christian ultimate: “...when we talk of the emptiness of God we mean that he is empty of the substantialist self-sufficiency we are so prone to ascribe to him.”⁸⁸ This is very similar language and logic to the Masao Abe and John Cobb dialogue previously discussed above. While it appears that O’Leary adopts a more open and nuanced view of emptiness as a comparative tool, the language and logic employed are markedly similar to the earlier dialogue.

The value in O’Leary’s analysis is found in his basic questions concerning the logic of the dialogue. It is worth quoting at length:

...one must think through one’s notions of God until they transform into traces of emptiness. Reification short-circuits the imaginative functioning of religious language and weighs it down with objects of clinging and defensiveness. When these are dissolved, religion becomes a style of discourse and practice that consistently heals, opens, and frees the mind...The reification of God is reflected in the processes of reification and fetishism that warp religious thinking at every level.⁸⁹

O’Leary, though he demonstrates a thoroughgoing knowledge of Buddhism, seems to reflect the interpretations of others in his analysis.⁹⁰ He does offer, however, an insightful Christian critique that is useful in the overall goal of dialogue: “...we can no longer construct the concept of God along the lines of mythical narrative or ontotheological metaphysics...Today ‘God’ is a flexible pointer, used as a skillful means for indicated the empty realm of Spirit.”⁹¹

F. Future Work in Emptiness between Christianity and Buddhism

Common to the themes discussed, the general theme of emptiness serves as a point of departure for both traditions because it is highly nuanced, arguably compatible with certain key aspects of both traditions, and seeks “truth” through the analytical method of negation. While much work has been done in this field, there is much left to do. Recent, and somewhat

⁸⁷ Ibid. 172.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 172-173.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 173-174.

⁹⁰ See especially page 175ff.

⁹¹ Ibid. 177.

widespread, criticisms of the methodologies behind the Abe-Cobb dialogue, as well as the greater discussion that ensued regarding emptiness, must be acknowledged. This is not say, however, that emptiness may be dispensed as a hermeneutical and methodological tool of comparison. Rather, further precision of vocabulary, revision of the Abe-Cobb dialogue, and a framework that is true to the teachings of both traditions are needed to continue the dialogue. However, as Cobb proposes in his *Beyond Dialogue*, both traditions must be open to “mutual transformation.” This is an excellent suggestion from a diplomatic and dialogue-driven framework, but the philosophical backdrop is a bit more complicated. More specifically, linguistic concerns suggest that something is lost in the identity of the religions if such “mutual transformation” occurs. To that end, an examination of emptiness in each tradition’s own vocabulary is necessary to preserve each religion’s unique identity.

III. Buddhist Literature: Emptiness as an Internal Logic

The literature of the Buddhist tradition is voluminous; that which comprises the idea of emptiness is also vast. The intent here is to contextualize how that literature might be examined with specific points. Some of the general classifications include how primary and secondary literatures are treated in this project.

A. Buddhism at a Glance – Introductory Material

One of the most paradoxical components of the study of Buddhism is that, while there are many studies of the foundations of the tradition, most of the secondary literature seems to be introductory in depth and scope. What is included in this brief survey is a look at some foundational pieces and how they relate directly (and in some cases indirectly) to the teaching of emptiness. Emptiness allows for a more precise discussion, a more in-depth look at other aspects of Buddhism, and a method by which introductory material may point to something more meaningful.

A very good introduction to the development of Buddhism in its earliest phases, extending to the Zen tradition, is found in William de Bary's *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, and Japan*. De Bary's analysis takes seriously the teaching of emptiness and how it was used as a common thread through the highly nuanced and different development of Buddhism. To de Bary's credit, he presents emptiness in the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna Buddhism with clarity, yet with the technical nuance to reflect the paradoxical nature of emptiness:

...Emptiness or Void (Śūnyatā) is all that truly exists...But the phenomenal world is true pragmatically, and therefore has qualified reality for practical purposes...Emptiness, on the other hand, never changes. It is absolute truth and absolute being – in fact is the same as Nirvāna and the Body of Essence of the Buddha...Thus all beings were already participants of the Emptiness which was Nirvāna, they were already Buddha if only they would realize it.⁹²

De Bary goes on to trace how emptiness played a vital role in the development of Buddhism in China. Specifically, he details how the T'ien-t'ai teaching of the "Perfectly Harmonious Threefold Truth" is dependent upon a correct understanding of emptiness insofar as emptiness shapes how the three (teachings) are one (absolute) and the one (absolute) is three (teachings).⁹³ This extends to in de Bary's analysis through Japanese Buddhism; he does well to explain how Mādhyamika deeply influenced the teaching of emptiness in Japanese Buddhism.⁹⁴ His summation of the Japanese import of emptiness is worth quoting at length:

The Way of Emptiness insisted on the need to free oneself from anything external, including such concepts as Heaven, in order to seek the ultimate, undifferentiated reality within. Externals are so changeable that they can only deceive. They must therefore be negated exhaustively until all the distinctions and concepts which arise from incomplete knowledge are destroyed and ultimate truth is intuitively realized.⁹⁵

⁹² William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, and Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 77-78. De Bary sites his primary source for this understanding from *Lalitavistara* 13.175-77: "All things conditioned are conditioned by ignorance, And on the final analysis they do not exist, For they and the conditioning ignorance alike are Emptiness, In their essential nature, without power of action..." Ibid. 96.

⁹³ Ibid. 156.

⁹⁴ He traces the teaching of emptiness with the idea that emptiness is intrinsically related to the absolute: "Things are empty of any enduring selfhood or identity, because they are transitory and subject to change. Only Emptiness endures, is final and absolute." Ibid. 262.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 262.

The value of de Bary's analysis rests with his special attention to tracing emptiness as a foundational catalyst by which Buddhism developed.

Also important in the tracing of Buddhist studies in terms of emptiness are Paul Williams' *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* and his *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. In the former text, Williams contributes significantly to the field by offering specific connections of emptiness with the Madhyamaka view that emptiness cannot be equated with nihilism while stating that emptiness is central to understanding other key positions like dependent origination.⁹⁶ Williams' *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* lends insight into how the function of emptiness shapes Mahāyāna Buddhism through the key concept, "Emptiness is the ultimate truth...[it] is hence a property (expressed in English by the '-ness' ending), a property possessed by everything. Everything has the property of being empty of intrinsic existence."⁹⁷ Other introductory works that are beneficial in the discussion of emptiness in Buddhism include Peter Harvey's *An Introduction to Buddhism*⁹⁸ and Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*.⁹⁹

Concerning primary texts, one can hardly read a serious study of primary texts in the English language without touching upon the work of Edward Conze. His early work in English translation of key Buddhist texts is an important step in introducing the western world to Buddhism. Conze's *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* presents a satisfactory introduction into some of these texts. More specifically, Conze's choice of primary Buddhist texts reflects the centrality of emptiness as an operative piece of development. As an

⁹⁶ Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 147-152.

⁹⁷ Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 70.

⁹⁸ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹⁹ Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

introduction into Buddhism, Conze focuses his translations of emptiness around the teaching that dharmas are essentially and necessarily empty.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Conze's translation of the *Prajñāpāramitā Hrdaya* is especially useful because it draws attention to a very nuanced understanding of emptiness.¹⁰¹ Conze's translation and compilation of primary texts is useful because it begins to highlight the common thread of emptiness in early Buddhist thought.¹⁰²

Quite helpful as a critical literary engagement with modern European and American reception of Buddhism is Andrew Tuck's *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*.¹⁰³ Tuck alludes to his thesis, and further demonstrates the full force of it, throughout his argument; in the afterward of his work, he spells out the major point:

...the focus of the work is not an attempt to critically understand one of the central works of Buddhist thought, but rather an examination of the role that modern, Western philosophy plays in the interpretation of non-Western classic texts. This has been a study in cross-cultural hermeneutics.¹⁰⁴

The value of Tuck's thesis is his examination of Nāgārjuna scholarship through the prism of isogenesis, or "...a 'reading into' the text that often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the text being interpreted."¹⁰⁵ Tuck maintains this hermeneutical stance throughout his text, showing quite cogently the mischaracterizations and misappropriations of Nāgārjuna scholarship in modern analysis. This is of especial help when bearing in mind the plethora of different interpretations ascribed to Nāgārjuna; where it is of limited import, however, is Tuck's limited engagement with specific texts. He spends much time "standing above" the fray of argument, but does little to engage. It may be argued that this is his point,

¹⁰⁰ Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 127.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 152-153. Specifically, what is beneficial to a nuanced understanding of emptiness is the teaching that "...form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form...all dharmas are marked with emptiness, they are neither produced nor stopped..." Ibid. 152.

¹⁰² While Conze's translations have been further examined and questioned recently, it is hard to dispute the importance of his texts in the English-reading world. While his translations, like all translations, are subject to criticism and clarification, it is important to note this early pioneer of English translation.

¹⁰³ Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 94.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 9-10.

but it may be questioned if he commits “isogesis” himself by criticizing others’ positions without offering up his own.

B. A Sample of Primary Sources on Buddhist Emptiness

1. Discussion and Limitations

As briefly outlined above, it is simply impossible to outline and discuss every ancient reference to emptiness in the Buddhist tradition. The vastness of the literature indicates the importance of the doctrine in its own right, but the academic study of emptiness is limited to particular points. As such, the discussion herein is purposely limited to representative texts that illustrate the whole of the themes of Buddhist literature. This is necessary for space and time, as well for summation purposes. The texts discussed below are meant to serve as pointers to the greater implications of emptiness in Buddhism.

2. The *Prajñāpāramitā Hridaya Sūtra* (The Heart Sūtra)

The *Prajñāpāramitā Hridaya Sūtra*, or *Heart Sūtra*, is an extremely short, yet pregnant piece of literature that serves as foundational thinking to the Mahāyanā tradition. There are numerous commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* because of its value within the tradition; amongst them are Garma Chang’s translation and discussion in *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*. Chang argues, “The importance of this remarkable Buddhist classic and its wide influence on Buddhist thought cannot be overstressed.”¹⁰⁶ Chang goes on to provide an excellent commentary to the centrality of emptiness for this passage. Another translation and commentary that is valuable to the field is Red Pine’s *The Heart Sutra*. Pine provides a line-by-line commentary that argues a similar point to Chang’s.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Garma C.C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1991), 64.

¹⁰⁷ Red Pine, *The Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004).

The *Heart Sūtra* focuses on emptiness as “not arising, not ceasing, not defiled, not pure, not increasing, [and] not decreasing.”¹⁰⁸ Other descriptions of emptiness include various negations, utilizing a model of negating terms of existence.¹⁰⁹ Some commentators, including Chang, argue that the *Heart Sūtra* contains the “essence of the entire Mahāyāna teaching [and] is contained therein.”¹¹⁰

3. The *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Cūlasunnata Sutta*

Central to the Theravāda tradition and spanning some of the earliest Buddhist texts, the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* both present compelling evidence for the primacy of emptiness in the tradition. Originally compiled in the Pāli language, Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation into English is generally recognized as the authoritative modern source, though some earlier translations were undertaken by the Pāli Text Society.¹¹¹ Helpful modern commentaries on these works include Winston L. King’s article, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates” and Nancy Wilson Ross’ monograph, *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought*.¹¹²

The main themes of the *Cūlasunnata Sutta*’s treatment of emptiness rests in the immensely complex dialectic that later informs many Buddhist thinkers’ conceptions of emptiness, including Nāgārjuna.¹¹³ Furthermore, negation is central to the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* insofar as it outlines the dichotomy and tension between affirmation and negation.¹¹⁴ This

¹⁰⁸ Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, 65.

¹⁰⁹ See *ibid.* 65ff.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 64.

¹¹¹ *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasunnata Sutta 121: The Shorter Discourse on Voidness*, trans. and revised Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).

¹¹² See Winston L. King, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 33, no. 3 (July 1983), and Nancy Wilson Ross, *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

¹¹³ *Middle Length Discourses*, 968.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 969.

negation plays a central role in the illusiveness of emptiness because it calls into question what it means to “have” being or non-being.¹¹⁵

In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the influence of emptiness is focused much more on the tension between interiority and exteriority as emptiness is shown to be a path towards “emancipation.”¹¹⁶ Here the movement is from the theory of emptiness in the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* to the projection of “emancipation” from the cycle of being. This is an important theoretical shift because the doctrine of emptiness is shaped from a philosophy into a religious teaching insofar as the “path” to “cessation” is realized.¹¹⁷

4. Emptiness in Nāgārjuna

As Charles Jones demonstrates, Nāgārjuna received considerable attention, especially in the west, after Masao Abe popularized many of his ideas in the well-documented dialogue with John Cobb, Jr. in the late twentieth century.¹¹⁸ Jones questions the influence of Nāgārjuna until that point, especially within the Mahāyāna tradition.¹¹⁹ While Jones presents convincing evidence for this point, he does not fully elucidate how the real influence of Nāgārjuna is realized in his revision (and in his own eyes, reformation of the original teaching) of Buddhist emptiness. Whereas Jones recognizes his importance in the scope of ancient Buddhism, the full impact of Nāgārjuna’s ideas are simply more foundational than the credit Jones gives.¹²⁰ This impact is painstakingly undertaken by a number of modern interpreters, including the commentary to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* by Jay Garfield.¹²¹

The two texts of Nāgārjuna examined here are his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Most of the study of Nāgārjuna comes from the former text, but it is

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 970.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 974.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Jones, “Emptiness, Kenōsis, History, and Dialogue,” 117ff.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 118-119.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 119.

¹²¹ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. with commentary Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

important to remember that the latter text “is a foundational text of Madhyamaka dialectics.”¹²² In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna aptly demonstrates how he does not take a position on emptiness, therefore his conclusions cannot be (logically) invalidated. This is important to the dialectics of emptiness because he is able to show how all things are empty of independent substance, even his own argument.

Other recent commentators that stress the overall importance of Nāgārjuna’s ideas include David Kalupahana¹²³ and Kenneth Inada.¹²⁴ Perhaps most helpful in recent Nāgārjuna reception is Paul Williams’ patient and detailed clarification of the internal logic of emptiness. Williams offers keen insight into analyzing linguistic nuances of emptiness in two articles, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka” and “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought.”¹²⁵ Also quite helpful is D. Seyfort Ruegg’s article “The Uses of the Four Positions of the Catuskoṭi and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism.”¹²⁶ These articles specifically delve into the deeper nuance of logic present in emptiness.

Modern interpreters and expositors of Nāgārjuna’s ideas often focus on the centrality of emptiness as the key to understanding Nāgārjuna’s critique. Michael Barnhart succinctly contextualizes Nāgārjuna’s ideas: “that existence presupposes relations, and relations resist a substantialist account. There is no absolute, nonrelational, independent ‘presence’ that is unconditioned.”¹²⁷ Roger Corless argues a similar point when he summarizes Nāgārjuna’s

¹²² K. Bhattacharya, “Some Notes on the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 5 (1977/1978), 237.

¹²³ David Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).

¹²⁴ Kenneth Inada, *Nāgārjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994).

¹²⁵ Paul Williams, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 8 (1980) and Paul Williams, “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 2 (June 1991).

¹²⁶ D. Seyfort Ruegg, “The Uses of the Four Positions of the Catuskoṭi and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 5 (1977/1978).

¹²⁷ Michael G. Barnhart, “Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 44 (October 1994): 652.

emphasis on the foundational quality of emptiness: “Nāgārjuna maintains that conceived reality is an impenetrably closed logical system about which nothing can be truly said, although one may function within it.”¹²⁸ Malcolm David Eckel’s influential monograph, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*, provides an excellent insight into Nāgārjuna’s conclusion because he argues for a differing point-of-view where Nāgārjuna’s conclusions essentially amount to a paradigm shift: “none of the normal distinctions between things applies. But Emptiness itself is a distinct position, too, and when it is analyzed from the point of view of Emptiness, it also has to be empty.”¹²⁹ However, as previously discussed, Andrew Tuck’s *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship* stands as a central text in Nāgārjuna reception because he clarifies many of the existing positions as views worked out by interpreters who saw Nāgārjuna by their *chosen* hermeneutic.

This sampling demonstrates how Nāgārjuna’s conclusion, the emptiness of emptiness, is a position that requires a detailed analysis with various hermeneutical provisions and considerations.

5. Zen Sources of Emptiness

The task of examining primary sources in the Zen tradition is inherently illogical within its own “system” of thought. The crux of the Zen tradition is based upon the *practice* of meditation, not texts, words, ideas, or constructs. Thus, what is present in the tradition is, at the very best, series of koans, sayings, and recorded teachings of Zen masters (and even those are very limited because Zen students did not venerate their teachers like in other traditions).

¹²⁸ Roger J. Corless, “Speaking of the Unspeakable: Negation as the Way in Nicholas of Cusa and Nāgārjuna” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 2 (1982): 111.

¹²⁹ Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 43.

Paul Reps' compilation of Zen stories and koans is helpful because it presents the essence of Zen, and furthermore the essence of emptiness and how it informs Zen practice. For example, in a short story, a student describes his understanding of emptiness: "The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no delusion, no sage, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received."¹³⁰ The purpose of the Zen story, however, is in his master's response to the student: he "whacked" his student, thereby making him quite "angry."¹³¹ The master asks the student, "If nothing exists...where did this anger come from?"¹³² The essence of emptiness in this story comes from the student's reification of emptiness; the master's response illustrates Zen's response to emptiness: even emptiness itself is empty. Other short stories support this general conclusion, including how emptiness eludes any statement because it is unreified.¹³³

One of the more important elements of Reps' compilation is found in the collection of the "ten bulls." Originally these were wood carvings meant to illustrate the "sequent steps in the realization of one's true nature...The bull is the eternal principle of life, truth in action."¹³⁴ Especially notable is the eighth bull where the image is empty, where "both bull and self transcended."¹³⁵ This is meant to represent the clarity of mind found in enlightenment, the emptiness of reality where "Whip, rope, person, and bull – all merge in No-Thing."¹³⁶

Modern Zen writers expand upon the teachings of emptiness as being a catalyst of sorts to understanding the "nature" of Zen (or meditation) itself. This material can be found

¹³⁰ Paul Reps, compiler, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1957), 69.

¹³¹ Ibid. 69-70.

¹³² Ibid. 70.

¹³³ See especially Ibid. 78, "Letter to a Dying Man."

¹³⁴ Ibid. 134.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 150.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

in works by D.T. Suzuki, including *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*,¹³⁷ three volumes of *Essays in Zen Buddhism*,¹³⁸ and *Manual of Zen Buddhism*.¹³⁹ Other notable commentaries include Chen-Chi Chang's "The Nature of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism,"¹⁴⁰ Dale Riepe's "The Significance of the Attack upon Rationality by Zen Buddhism,"¹⁴¹ T.P. Kasulis's *Zen Action / Zen Person*,¹⁴² Merv Fowler's *Zen Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices*,¹⁴³ and Heinrich Dumoulin's *A History of Zen Buddhism*.¹⁴⁴

C. Buddhist Teachings of Emptiness

The quantity of primary literature in Buddhism that deals with emptiness in particular vastly outnumbers what is possible to study with any kind of depth. For this project, it is necessary to take a sampling of some ancient primary sources, examine the commentary of both ancient and modern thinkers, and contextualize it with the essence of overall Buddhist emptiness. The literatures examined here have the several similar characteristic of treating emptiness as a crux in understanding Buddhism as a whole. Firstly, ancient and modern sources tend to emphasize the mistake of trying to reify emptiness; they stress the importance of leaving a proper understanding of emptiness open because it cannot and should not be substantiated. Secondly, Buddhist interpretations of emptiness seem to center around the emptiness of even emptiness itself. Though this is made explicit in some traditions (like the Mahāyāna tradition), it is more implicit in others (like Zen for example). Thirdly, emptiness as a teaching of non-substantiality is relied upon for further illumination of other teachings

¹³⁷ D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964). See especially pages 48-57.

¹³⁸ D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Press, 1927), and *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Second Series* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1933), and *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Third Series* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1934).

¹³⁹ D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1934).

¹⁴⁰ Chen-Chi Chang, "The Nature of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism" *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 6, no. 4 (January 1957).

¹⁴¹ Dale Riepe, "The Significance of the Attack upon Rationality by Zen Buddhism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 26, no. 3 (March 1966).

¹⁴² T.P. Kasulis, *Zen Action / Zen Person* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1981).

¹⁴³ Merv Fowler, *Zen Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005).

¹⁴⁴ Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., *A History of Zen Buddhism*, trans. Paul Peachey (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959).

like *nirvāna* and *samsāra*. For these reasons, it is argued that the teaching of emptiness is an essential contextual tool that holds the internal logic of Buddhism together. The combined survey of primary and secondary literature is meant to contextualize how emptiness serves this function in the internal logic of Buddhism.

IV. Christian Apophaticism: The Language of Negation

A. Apophatic Thought

Though “apophaticism” is not limited to a particular tradition *per se*, the focus here is generally associated with medieval Christian theology in a general way and with the thought of Meister Eckhart in a more specific sense.

Perhaps one of the foundational contemporary texts dealing with medieval Christian apophaticism is Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Turner’s treatment of apophaticism centers on the “interplay of negation and affirmation, embracing ontology, dialectics and metaphor.”¹⁴⁵ One of Turner’s theses deals with “the double nature of negation - a sense that negation operates in two roles or at two mutually interacting levels: at a first-order level of experience and at a second-order level of the critique of experience.”¹⁴⁶ This is important to understand how medieval mysticism fits within the whole of Christian theology; Turner’s text provides this very contextualization because he centers it squarely in the “theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found.”¹⁴⁷ Turner’s work is a first-rate engagement with Christian mysticism, indeed as a “retrieval of the mediaeval tradition of apophatic, or ‘negative’ mysticism,”¹⁴⁸ and his scholarship is of immense value; however, inasmuch as Turner wants to straddle the

¹⁴⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 271.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 270.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 8. Italics original.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 5.

seemingly disparate poles of experience and spirituality within mysticism, his categories of analysis do not seem to separate these out adequately. The greater theme here is negativity, moreover the *function* of negativity within the language of mysticism, which seems to take precedent over the concerns of what constitutes experience and/or spirituality.

Other texts that offer insight into Christian apophaticism include *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner. This collection of essays on apophaticism helps contextualize the very relevant incorporation of negative theology with modern Christian thought.¹⁴⁹ Within this collection, Bernard McGinn offers a comparison (discussing Eckhart in relation to Luther) while also offering a succinct discussion of Eckhart's understanding of emptiness.¹⁵⁰ Another seminal text within this tradition is Oliver Davies' *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe*; Davies examines the major currents of apophatic thought and how they are relevant to current theological discourse.¹⁵¹ Davies offers an excellent introduction to medieval thinking because he contextualizes the major themes between the church and the university. Another text that deserves mention for its lucidity is John Macquarrie's treatment of Christian mysticism in relation to apophatic thought in his *Two Worlds are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*.¹⁵²

In a more general discussion, older studies like Louis Bouyer's *A History of Christian Spirituality*,¹⁵³ Bernard McGinn's *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*,¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See especially Davies' and Turner's introduction.

¹⁵⁰ See Bernard McGinn, "Vere tu es Deus absconditus: the hidden God in Luther and some mystics" in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103-104.

¹⁵¹ Oliver Davies, *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (New York: New City Press, 2006).

¹⁵² John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

¹⁵³ Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, 3 volumes (New York: Seabury, 1982).

¹⁵⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism, I: The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

and Simon Tugwell's *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality*,¹⁵⁵ all play important roles in an understanding of the development of medieval Christian theology. The aforementioned texts are but a small sampling of the literature available treating apophaticism; in order to connect at a more specific level, the thought of Meister Eckhart is considered.

B. Meister Eckhart: Primary Sources and Translations

One of the most notable attributes of Meister Eckhart's writing is his usage of the (officially accepted) Church Latin as well as his vernacular, Middle High German. Writing in the latter part of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Eckhart's original (extant) texts remain something of their own specialty.¹⁵⁶ However, there are a number of exceptional translations that do proper justice to Eckhart's vocabulary, usage, and difficult constructions. In the English-speaking world, the first translation of Eckhart's works appeared in Claud Field's *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, published in 1900.¹⁵⁷ This was followed by N. Leeson's 1917 translation, *After Supper in the Refectory*.¹⁵⁸ A major work for Eckhart reception was C. de B. Evans' 1924 *Meister Eckhart by Franz Pfeiffer*, an updated translation with omissions and additions from Pfeiffer's 1857 German work.¹⁵⁹ Later editions and translations include Blakney's 1941 edition of *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*,¹⁶⁰ Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge's 1981 *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises*,

¹⁵⁵ Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984).

¹⁵⁶ Specialists often work from the critical edition of Eckhart's extant texts, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, hrsg., im Auftrage der deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936.

¹⁵⁷ Claud Field, trans., *Meister Eckhart's Sermons: First Time Translated into English* (London: H.R. Allenson, Ltd., 1900).

¹⁵⁸ N. Leeson, trans., *After Supper in the Refectory: Talks of Instruction* (London, Oxford, and Milwaukee), 1917.

¹⁵⁹ C. de B. Evans, trans., *Meister Eckhart by Franz Pfeiffer*, 2 Volumes (London: Watkins), 1924.

¹⁶⁰ Raymond Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941).

and Defense,¹⁶¹ McGinn and Frank Tobin's 1987 *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*,¹⁶² Oliver Davies' 1994 *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*,¹⁶³ and McGinn and Maurice Walshe's 2009 *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*.¹⁶⁴

C. Meister Eckhart: Secondary Literature

The sheer breadth of secondary literature that deals with Eckhart's biography, influence, and interpretation of his writings is voluminous. What appears here is a sampling of the secondary literature as it applies to the major themes of nothingness in his writing.¹⁶⁵ In what follows, the term "nothingness" is used to frame the negative language of apophaticism because it more closely aligns with Eckhart's usage.

David Tracy discusses Eckhart's appeal to emptiness as an apophatic "tool" in his *Dialogue with the Other*.¹⁶⁶ He goes so far as to connect Eckhart's theology of nothingness with Buddhism, and especially Zen Buddhism.¹⁶⁷ The value of Tracy's analysis rests in his understanding of how "[n]ot only Nothingness but One, Intelligence, and *Esse* seem to [Eckhart] appropriate if always inadequate language."¹⁶⁸ While Tracy follows McGinn's "interpretation on dialectic in Eckhart," his critical analysis of the importance of language in Eckhart's theology is beneficial.

In David Chidester's understanding of Eckhart, he draws out his "point[ing] to a similar annihilation of the self through divine union in which the soul 'has a will and a

¹⁶¹ Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge, trans. and ed., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

¹⁶² Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin, trans. and ed., *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

¹⁶³ Oliver Davies, ed. and trans., *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1994).

¹⁶⁴ Bernard McGinn, intro., Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009).

¹⁶⁵ Many of the secondary, interpretive pieces of literature appear in the introductions of the aforementioned critical translations.

¹⁶⁶ David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1990).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 88.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 89. Italics original.

longing for nothing.”¹⁶⁹ Chidester goes on to examine Eckhart’s usage of nothingness in relation to Christian concepts including the clarification of the divine Godhead.¹⁷⁰ Chidester’s conclusion argues for an interesting view of Eckhart’s influence: “In the bright darkness of the Godhead, Meister Eckhart found that the soul was nothing but God.”¹⁷¹

David Linge discusses many of Eckhart’s primary sermon topics (specifically poverty) and how they relate to nothingness. He highlights a central theme in the sermons that includes an understanding of God that is intrinsically related to nothingness insofar as God is “Beyond all names, beyond goodness, truth or being, the Godhead is the *Abgrund*, the abyss of deity. Desert, wilderness, darkness, nothing are all terms he uses to point to the Godhead.”¹⁷² Bernard McGinn goes in a different direction; he emphasizes Eckhart’s appeal to unification with God in nothingness because, “The *unum* is not negation, but negation of negation, the *sum qui sum* (“I am that I am”) of Exod. 3:14 that signifies the conversion of the ground of *esse* upon itself.”¹⁷³ While McGinn’s emphasis is different than Linge’s, the point is made that Eckhart’s understanding of nothingness in relation to the self and God is made with paradoxical statements. Frank Tobin’s reading of Eckhart places emphasis on his use of analogy: “Eckhart’s doctrine of analogy demands that we call creatures nothing if we call God *esse*, or that if we attribute *esse* to creatures we must call God something else. The essential feature of this doctrine of analogy is that it is not legitimate to join God and creature in any single concept.”¹⁷⁴ This latter point is not necessarily in distinction from McGinn and Linge, but the emphasis is important to note: for McGinn and Linge the understanding of emptiness and *esse* is paradoxical, but Tobin draws the parallel with Eckhart’s doctrine of

¹⁶⁹ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 253.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 254.

¹⁷² David Linge, “Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 46, no. 4 (1978): 474.

¹⁷³ Bernard McGinn, “The God Beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 61, no. 1 (1981): 15.

¹⁷⁴ Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 53. Italics original.

analogy. For Michael Sells, the emphasis on Trinitarian theology is central to understanding Eckhart's concept of self, other, and God: "...Eckhart's language violates the normal grammatical division between perfect and completed action, and imperfect or action in progress: the one and only-begotten son always *has been born* and always *is being born*."¹⁷⁵ How Eckhart expresses himself in terms of apophaticism is important in the secondary literature because numerous thinkers address how he wrestles with the difference between the self and God.

D. Eckhart and Buddhism

The vocabulary and conceptual argumentation used by Eckhart have given themselves well to contemporary interpreters of Buddhism; specifically Eckhart's usage of terms like "nothingness," "God beyond God," dependence upon negation, etc. have appealed especially to modern Zen interpreters. This comparison is essentially a twentieth century enterprise insofar as knowledge of Buddhism in Europe and knowledge of Christianity in Asia was limited prior to the twentieth century. However, modern comparative analysts have moved between the two traditions by drawing on Eckhart's understanding of negation.

This specific comparison is a major subject of D.T. Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, first published in 1957.¹⁷⁶ Suzuki uses a Zen Buddhist framework of understanding to interpret Eckhart's understanding of nothingness as it applies to Christian theology. Suzuki contextualizes Eckhart's theology as not fitting quite within the "type" of Christianity "we generally associate with rationalized modernism or with conservative traditionalism."¹⁷⁷ Suzuki goes to great pains to understand Eckhart in his own terms, with his own chosen vocabulary, and within the context of his historical time and thinking. In turn, Suzuki goes further to propose how a comparison between Eckhart and Zen is beneficial

¹⁷⁵ Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 148. Italics original.

¹⁷⁶ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 3.

because he admits to “grow firmly convinced that the Christian experiences are not after all different from those of the Buddhist.”¹⁷⁸ Only a few years after publication, Thomas Merton levels several apt criticisms of Suzuki’s use of Eckhart.¹⁷⁹ He highlights some confusion between the usage of “*mystical theology*” and “*experience* of the Zen Masters.”¹⁸⁰ Merton’s clarification is not so much a criticism of Suzuki’s analysis as a clarification of the use of nothingness in inter-religious comparisons.¹⁸¹

Outside of the Zen tradition, and within other (more generalized) forms of Buddhism, Richard Jones explores how Eckhart’s nuanced understanding of the self contributes heavily to a comparative understanding of the Buddhist rejection of the self.¹⁸² Beverly Lanzetta explores this idea in a different direction, arguing that Eckhart’s “pragmatic nothingness” serves as an excellent comparative tool to measure “similarity” in “dynamic openness.”¹⁸³ Lanzetta goes on to argue,

...in comparing the desert of the Godhead with dynamic *śūnyatā*, Buddhist scholars content that, while Eckhart presents a radical apophatic perspective, the desert of the Godhead still retains an ontological vocabulary intrinsic to Christianity...The radicalness of Zen is evident from the fact that it speaks of nothingness pure and simple, while Eckhart speaks of the nothingness of the godhead.¹⁸⁴

Lanzetta’s article pushes the boundary for comparison because her wide-sweeping comparisons open new concepts of comparison, namely in the understanding of how Eckhart’s understanding of theism and nothingness form the very framework of his apophatic theology.¹⁸⁵ Joseph Politella uses the same comparative tools, nothingness in Eckhart’s apophaticism and *śūnyatā*, to emphasize a different nuance in Eckhart’s thought: “He helps

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1968).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 42. Italics original.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸² Richard Jones, *Mysticism Examined: Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 37.

¹⁸³ Beverly Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 72, no. 2 (1992): 253.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 255. Italics original.

¹⁸⁵ See 249ff.

us find a new meaning for *Śūnyatā*. It is Suchness and Emptiness and No-thing-ness, but it is also Self-ness. The real thus finds expression in the visible world, but the expression is not the essence.”¹⁸⁶ Politella’s reading of Eckhart seems to differ from Jones’ reading insofar as Eckhart’s understanding of the self is concerned, and more applicably how that is to be applied in a comparative way. It is important to note that much of the connection rests on how terms like “emptiness” and “being” are defined. Tobin explains much of the difficulty lies with Eckhart’s thought, “...being is a term restricted to creatures. This is why one must refer to God as understanding or knowing, and not as being or existence.”¹⁸⁷ Reiner Schürmann further qualifies this point: “The opposition between being and nothingness in creatures is expressed in a different terminology...*Iht* [“something”] is denied; the creature is not ‘a something.’ *Iht* designates the existing in general: the creature endowed with a borrowed being...”¹⁸⁸

The methodological problem of comparing apophaticism in a fourteenth-century Christian mystic with that of Buddhist emptiness is addressed by the sources that attempt to do so. The textual problem that is not addressed (at least explicitly) deals with whether the language of both traditions is as compatible as scholars might want it to be. In other words, while dialogue is certainly possible, sometimes the language appears to be so close that it is tempting to simply take the analysis in the direction of direct comparison.

E. Christian Apophaticism and Eckhart

In the same way that the analysis of Buddhist emptiness pivots within the context of the nuance of the various traditions, the analysis of Christian apophaticism is enriched with the specific analysis of Eckhart’s thought. The idea here is to paint a more nuanced context by addressing the general issue (apophaticism) and then complimenting it with a specific

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Politella, “Eckhart and Eastern Wisdom,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1965): 126.

¹⁸⁷ Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, 36.

¹⁸⁸ Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 86-87. Italics original.

example (Eckhart). An examination of Eckhart's thought to contextualize apophaticism shows the difficulty of his thought and the fact that comparing it with other traditions is difficult at best. This difficulty of comparison highlights the need for an analytical bridge with which to bridge the gap of understanding. In this project, the thought of Jacques Derrida is examined for this purpose: deconstruction allows for a more fruitful discussion of negativity in Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism.

V. Jacques Derrida: Negativity and Deconstruction

A. Context

The thought of Jacques Derrida is immensely complex and difficult; while this project does not intend to focus primarily as an elucidation of his thought, the hope is that engagement with particular pieces of it will illuminate a way to align Buddhism and Christianity. More specifically, Derridean deconstruction, or a close reading of texts that brings out the subtle nuances, the various voices within the text, and the plethora of meanings, is utilized as a tool with which to examine negativity. As with the above contexts, first painted in general terms and then filled out with more specific examples, the thought of Derrida is specifically addressed with his idea of *différance* in Buddhism and *khôra* in Christianity.

B. Derrida: The Primary Literature

In an exceptionally productive career, Derrida wrote copiously. Amongst the most relevant (to this study) early texts is his *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*,¹⁸⁹ *Of Grammatology*,¹⁹⁰ and *Writing and Difference*.¹⁹¹ It is important to note that Derrida's early work did not deal with religious topics specifically,

¹⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

¹⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). In the interpretation of one of Derrida's most influential texts, Spivak's introduction provides an excellent critique and explanation of Derrida's thinking.

¹⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Routledge, 1978).

though there are occasional references. Much of his commentary regarding religious topics emerged later in his career, most specifically in articles such as “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” and “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices” which are both published in Coward and Foshay’s highly relevant *Derrida and Negative Theology*.¹⁹² Later texts, such as his *On the Name*¹⁹³ and “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone”¹⁹⁴ highlight Derrida’s direct engagement with the study of religion.

Derrida’s major early work, *Of Grammatology*, examines the literary work of thinkers including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the major implication of this early work is an examination of how texts are read, what presuppositions inform (a) reading, and the possibility of the binary opposition of presence/absence in what he labels “logocentrism.” The analytical value of work like *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* and *Writing and Difference* is not directly applicable to religious texts as such, but more to how religious texts might be read alongside other texts. Such themes as the authority of the text (namely that of the voice of the author), coupled with the binary oppositions of language (demonstrated as irreconcilable tensions), have direct consequences for all forms of literature, including religious literature. This later led to discussions of how certain concepts like difference/*différance* and *khôra* appear to function in a similar fashion as apophaticism. An introductory work that helps sort through the Derrida’s challenging vocabulary includes an early set of interviews published under the title *Positions*.¹⁹⁵ Significant to this text is Derrida’s uncharacteristic clarity in stating directly his take on particular logocentric ideas.

¹⁹² Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, ed., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

¹⁹³ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Religion*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

C. Derrida's Interpreters: Secondary Literature

Quality introductions to Derrida's work are rare simply due to the complexity of his work; amongst the most clearly-written and applicable to this study include Christopher Norris' *Derrida*,¹⁹⁶ an older exposition on his early themes. An excellent study of how Derridean themes might be applied to theological and philosophical themes includes Kevin Hart's seminal *The Trespass of the Sign*.¹⁹⁷

Foundational works like John Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*¹⁹⁸ and *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*¹⁹⁹ are essential to this study because they detail the intersection of religion and deconstruction; indeed, Caputo writes specifically on how *différance* and *khôra* are applicable to religious studies.²⁰⁰

D. Derrida, Buddhism, and Christianity: Contemporary Interpretation

One of the forefronts of Derridean interpretation and appropriation is the idea that deconstruction may contribute significantly to the comparative activity of Buddhism and Christianity. Furthermore, recent work has explored a connection between Derrida and Buddhism, Derrida and Christianity, and all three together.

Perhaps the foundational text for examining Derridean deconstruction in light of Christian theology is Hart's aforementioned *The Trespass of the Sign*. The analytical value here is also Hart's treatment of other thinkers, including Kant and Heidegger amongst others, and how a more complete picture might be drawn with these appropriations.

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁹⁷ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). Also, Dawne McCance's recent monograph, *Derrida on Religion: Thinker of Difference* (London: Equinox, 2009), is useful in examining Derridean themes in the study of religion, but this text is fairly introductory in its scope.

¹⁹⁸ John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁹⁹ John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

²⁰⁰ It is also important to note Hugh J. Silverman's collection *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), in which various contributors address religious themes.

On the forefront of interpreting Derrida, Buddhism, and Christianity together is Robert Magliola. His *Derrida on the Mend*²⁰¹ is an early and foundational text that compares key themes in Derridean thought, especially at the intersection of Buddhism and deconstruction. His later *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*²⁰² examines the concept of the negative in relation to Buddhism and Christianity with Derrida's deconstruction as the method. While Magliola's *Derrida on the Mend* is beneficial because it is an early appropriation of how Derridean thought might be relatable to Buddhism, his later work borders on the incomprehensible; Magliola seems to shift between interpreting and actually "performing" deconstruction (it may be put like that), and perhaps this is his intent to shift, (re)shape, and subvert language, but that overall analytical import for this project is limited.

Other important comparative analyses of Derrida, Buddhism, and/or Christianity include Howard Coward and Toby Foshay's *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Youxuan Wang's *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics*,²⁰³ and a compilation edited by Youru Wang, *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought*.²⁰⁴ A detailed bibliography of the recent works in these comparisons can be found in Jin Y. Park's *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*.²⁰⁵ Perhaps one of the most engaging compilations of comparative literature in this genre, Park's compilation of essays treats with the various contours of applying deconstruction to a/the study of Buddhism. In the introduction, Park elucidates the reasoning behind making such comparisons:

²⁰¹ Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (Lafayette: Perdue University Press, 1984).

²⁰² Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, American Academy of Religion, 1997).

²⁰³ Youxuan Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

²⁰⁴ Youru Wang, *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2007). This compilation has several essays mentioning the analytical importance of Derrida's *différance*, specifically Victor Forte's "The Ethics of Attainment: The Meaning of the Ethical in Dōgen and Derrida," and Robert Magliola's "Hongzhou Chan Buddhism, and Derrida Late and Early."

²⁰⁵ Jin Y. Park, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

Like dependent co-arising in Buddhism, Derridean *différance*, is the name which attests to the impossibility of drawing a line between things, between events and beings, because there is always something to come. That is the very inexhaustibility of contexts of one's existence.²⁰⁶

Further, Park elucidates particular themes in Derridean context and how they apply to a deconstructive analysis of Buddhism.²⁰⁷ Articles by Ian Mabbett²⁰⁸ and Zong-qi Cai²⁰⁹ elaborate on how Nāgārjuna and deconstruction have specific points of contact and how the school of Mādhyamika share analytical tools with Derridean deconstruction, respectively. One of the major contributions to this compilation is E.H. Jarow's suggestion of how Derridean deconstruction can lead to a development of on-going religious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, as well as other religions.²¹⁰

E. Derridean Themes

This brief introduction into the primary and secondary literatures that make up the thought of Derridean deconstruction is meant to develop a few sweeping contexts for further study. Specifically, it is a fairly recent analytical activity to engage deconstruction for the purpose of studying religion; this means that there are many slightly or underdeveloped themes that deserve consideration. The difficulty here is how to summarize such positions succinctly and lucidly; however, the potential benefits include how generative the approaches taken here may be. Deconstruction may be successfully argued to show the function of language in religion, even the masked and silenced voices within the texts. However, an initial critique of deconstruction in the study of religion might include how previous work in the field seems to attempt an all-inclusive methodology. Deconstruction is fluid and

²⁰⁶ Ibid. xvi. Italics original.

²⁰⁷ See Jin Y. Park, "Naming the Unnameable: Dependent Co-arising and *Différance*" in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), pp. 7–20.

²⁰⁸ Ian Mabbett, "Nāgārjuna and Deconstruction" in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 21–42.

²⁰⁹ Zong-qi Cai, "Derridean and Mādhyamika Buddhist Theories of Deconstruction" in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 47–62.

²¹⁰ See E.H. Jarow, "Zen Flesh, Bones, and Blood: Deconstructing Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 223–234.

unpredictable; thus, the attempt here is to loosely frame deconstruction within a typology to allow for this fluidity.

VI. Conclusion

There is much work to be done in the emerging field of Buddhist-Christian studies. Though there have been increasingly-influential dialogues undertaken in the last half century, the research done thus far simply does not begin to cover the rich and varied histories of two of the world's most significant religious traditions. As this study attempts to undertake the goal of contributing to this dialogue, albeit in a small way, the expressed goal is to read, write, and understand each tradition in and on its own terms. The typology and methodology seek to outline how this might be accomplished: through extended and detailed studies of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism, without discussion or interference of the other tradition, each in and on its own terms. This drives a purposeful division *between* the two, though this is a comparative study. This maneuver is for the sole purpose of setting up a bridge by which Derridean deconstruction might contribute to how emptiness and apophaticism are studied.

The survey of literature helps situate the methodology and typology within this growing field; foundational studies show the fruitfulness of such endeavors, while also illustrating where future studies might pick up. The intent here is to be one such study because the methodology allows for both a general study of religious studies in terms of deconstruction, as well as how the specific deconstructive terms *difference/différance* and *khôra* might lend themselves to a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism.

Chapter II

Buddhist Emptiness: Contextualization, Language, and Internal Logic

I. Introduction: The Paradigm of Buddhist Emptiness

One of the key components of the methodology of this project is to preserve the unique voice of both the Christian and Buddhist traditions. To do that, it is important to situate emptiness in the Buddhist tradition and apophaticism in the Christian tradition as separate constructs. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize Buddhist *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, within the wider narrative of Buddhism; this is accomplished by examining the function of how emptiness (in)forms three traditions of Buddhism. This sets up a framework for later discussion on how to align Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism via Derridean deconstruction, though in separate analyses. The purpose here is to be as holistic as possible, though it is acknowledged that this is a difficult task because emptiness is not part of an entire “system” of thought. In order to address this general theme, emptiness is the commonality, the central theme that runs through the examination below.

The goal here is to show how emptiness informs the interior logic of Buddhism; this will allow for a more nuanced and filled-out analysis when emptiness is examined through Derridean difference/*différance* in Chapter Four. In this discussion on the internal logic of emptiness, it is argued that negative language strips away falsities and forces the boundaries of language of particular teachings. Thus, it is more accurate to call this approach, through specific traditions in particular functions, a paradigmatic approach because “[e]mptiness means no longer Zero, but unlimitedness, overflowing reality that cannot be expressed, contained, or limited in any specifiable way...”²¹¹ The paradigmatic approach means viewing emptiness as more than religious dogma; it means analyzing emptiness as a key aspect of Buddhism. This chapter is primarily descriptive because it serves to situate Buddhist

²¹¹ Winston L. King, “Śūnyatā as a Master-Symbol,” *Numen*, vol. 17, fasc. 2 (August 1970), 103.

emptiness with the construct of negativity; secondarily, it sets up how negative language might be appropriated within Derridean deconstruction in Chapter Four.

A. The Scope of the Study: the Value of Emptiness

1. The Philosophical Problem

In a general sense, Buddhist emptiness exposes non-substantiality, or that it not only lacks substance “itself,” but that it exposes the lack of substance of all things; emptiness stands against reification, or “thing-ness.” Paul Williams helps flesh out the logic: “If an entity is causally conditioned then ultimately it does not exist.”²¹² Intrinsically, then, the philosophical problem is quite uncomplicated: how is emptiness expressed without some sort of reification that automatically draws the description into an un-expressible paradox? Not surprisingly, the response is similarly uncomplicated: emptiness is not express-able because it must remain empty of reification, of “thing-ness.”²¹³ This, however, does not accurately work out how emptiness is paradigmatic to Buddhism. The problem persists: in order for emptiness to play such a central role in Buddhist thinking, it can be described in some way, albeit with incomplete language. The question can be asked here, though, of what is lost with/in emptiness? Is there not something always “other,” always separate, always incomplete with emptiness? Williams helps tease this out: “All words have referents, but these referents are *prajñaptimātra*, that is, they exist *only* as referents, there is no ultimate real behind their referential status.”²¹⁴

What is demonstrated in this chapter is that Buddhist thinkers go to great lengths to clarify and de-reify the language of emptiness; therefore, the language that makes up emptiness is important in how it informs Buddhist thinking. One key pattern to the language

²¹² Paul Williams, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 8 (1980): 13.

²¹³ King furthers the nuance in his working definition: “Indeed it is by definition utterly beyond all specification, definition, or direct symbolization: to deal with it by concept or representation of any sort is to falsify or limit it.” Ibid. 97.

²¹⁴ Williams, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka,” 13. Italics original.

of emptiness, whether in extant ancient or modern texts, is the relational aspect: emptiness is used to describe other teachings, but not necessarily “itself.” This is important to remember because the relational aspect informs the internal logic. In the earliest Buddhist writings, emptiness is rendered philosophically negative, though not necessarily in the conventional sense. Rather, emptiness seems to act more as a tool to demonstrate non-substantiality, non-reification and the centrality of dependent co-origination.²¹⁵ However, the thinking may go deeper than that: perhaps emptiness is *the* inner critique of ancient Indic philosophical assumptions. As a philosophy and religion of reform, Buddhism’s sharp critiques of other Indic practices seem to center around the demonstration of the “emptiness” of all things and no-things.²¹⁶ A close examination of some of the earliest Buddhist texts reveals how emptiness finds its locus within other major teachings, and is, therefore, a centerpiece of Buddhist thinking. A careful delineation is spelled out here, though: whereas teachings like dependent co-origination, *samsāra*, *dharma*, and even *nibbāna* (to an extent) can be philosophically elucidated within the limited confines of language, emptiness remains slippery, elusive, and of no substance in itself. A specific example would be in the

²¹⁵ For example, Michael Barnhart clarifies that Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamkārikā* “forcefully” argued that “No thing, including nothing itself, had *svabhāva* or substantial and individual being, self-identity, self-being, or self-existence. Rather, emptiness, or *śūnyatā* was dependence; that all things were empty meant that all things were mutually (and thoroughly) dependent...” This is an important clarification, and in Nāgārjuna’s mind reform, of Buddhist emptiness: that emptiness defined “existence” by no-thing-ness. Michael Barnhart, “Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 44, no. 4 (October 1994): 649. Italics original. A recent article takes issue with this (and other) interpretations of Nāgārjuna. Abraham Vélez de Cea argues that “the common identity between *samsāra* and *nibbāna* that is inferable from Pāli texts cannot be monistic and absolute, but rather limited and relative to the emptiness of self and taints experienced by liberated beings” (pg. 513; italics original). Cea goes further to call such traditional interpretations of Nāgārjuna’s emptiness “questionable” because they rest on “assumptions” (pg. 516). Rather than the traditional “assumptions” that Nāgārjuna’s use of emptiness represented a radical shift in Buddhist philosophy, Cea asserts, “Since the *Kātyāyana Sūtra* contains a connection between the teaching of dependent arising as the middle way and the teaching of nonself, and since the concept of nonself is a synonym for emptiness, I do not see enough grounds for considering Nāgārjuna’s equating of dependent arising and emptiness as a revolutionary innovation not entailed by the Pāli *suttas*.” Abraham Vélez de Cea, “Emptiness in the Pāli *Suttas* and the Question of Nāgārjuna’s Orthodoxy,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 55, no. 4 (October 2005): 523. Italics original.

²¹⁶ King seems to support this thinking with the following justification: “Beginningless-endless-rebirth governed by moralistic cause-effect of *karman*, an existence whose hallmarks are impermanence, emptiness of reality, and suffering, and the possibility of an absolutely full and final release from all this (*moksa-nibbāna*) are assumed without question – as well as many other views of ontological / metaphysical implication.” Winston L. King, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 33, no. 3 (July 1983): 264.

Madhyamika school's approach to emptiness; as D. Seyfort Ruegg explains, "...Mādhyamika theory, which stresses the fact that it is not the function of *śūnyatā* to make *dharma*s empty but that *śūnyatā* simply reveals that *dharma*s are empty."²¹⁷ The efficaciousness (if any) of emptiness is found when it is *not* delineated, expanded upon by itself, or used as a means in itself; emptiness remains elusive of final definition or description because it is always in "flux." Michael Barnhart suggests that the "problem" with emptiness is "if it is true that everything is empty in the sense that absolutely and mutually dependent, then we lack the ability to define horizons, perspectives, the space of reasons, and meaningful conceptual boundaries."²¹⁸ However, Barnhart does not go far enough because it seems like this is exactly the point: the value of emptiness is *relational* in terms of non-substantiality. In other words, Buddhist emptiness exposes the empty nature of all things. This view of emptiness is further supported by the thinker Nāgārjuna; as King clarifies his position, "When Nāgārjuna demonstrated the empty-because-relative nature of all substantive concepts, he did not then enthrone *śūnyatā* in their place. For him emptiness was a mode of apprehension of the universe, the core of spiritual discipline, not an entity of any sort."²¹⁹

2. The Problem of the "Existence" of Emptiness: Paradigmatic Inquiry

What does it mean to say that emptiness is paradigmatic of the inner logic of the Buddhist tradition? The critiques explored thus far suggest there is no answer, not even a description, which could even approach that question. However, emptiness appears in each Buddhist tradition with varying degrees of influence. Thus, it must have some analytical "value" insofar as it is a symbol, metaphor, or signification to a greater or deeper truth. Winston L. King addresses this paradox by calling Buddhist emptiness a "master symbol" because it "*participates integrally* in all of the limited reality-forms which our limited

²¹⁷ D. Seyfort Ruegg, "The Uses of the Four Positions of the 'Catuṣkoṭi' and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 5 (1977/1978): 31. Italics original.

²¹⁸ Barnhart, "Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability," 650.

²¹⁹ King, "The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates," 267.

apprehensions project upon It.”²²⁰ Though King presents a creative way to examine *śūnyatā*, he risks the objectification and ultimate reification that symbols posit.²²¹ However, what he says has much analytical value because it gets closer to the paradox of *śūnyatā*, albeit with the warnings of reification and objectification. This brings into sharper focus a central question: at what point is language dispensed for the “truth” of emptiness expressed negatively? Even more: how is *śūnyatā* paradigmatic of Buddhist thought, indeed as a connection with other teachings, if it is (un)limited linguistically to non-substantiality and non-reification? In a separate article, King addresses these questions:

...the basic Buddhist point of view...is that there is some sort of ultimate reality beyond our merely subjective thoughts and sensations that occasions them; but that in our thoughts, our terms and names for these realities, and our philosophical systems we do not deal with ultimate entities at their deepest levels of reality and meaning.²²²

Thus, King points to a central component of this study: Buddhist teachings are not limited to strict, literal, linguistic studies, and they are not limited to symbolic metaphors. Ever the “middle way,” Buddhist understandings of emptiness gather their analytical “value” in their paradoxical interpretations of non-substantiality and linguistic non-reification.

3. The Problem of Language: Emptiness in/of Buddhism

Emptiness is foundational to understanding Buddhism, but it remains pivoted between reification and as a critique of substantiality. The question here is the “effect” it has on other Buddhist teachings since it “is” not substantiation “itself.” The teaching of emptiness eludes clear articulation because of its effect upon other teachings (i.e. non-substantiation) is tempered by the fact that it cannot be reified into a teaching/thing “itself.” D.T. Suzuki helps clarify this position:

[Śūnyatā] is what makes the existence of anything possible, but it is not to be conceived immanently, as if it lay hidden in or under every existence as an

²²⁰ King, “Śūnyatā as a Master Symbol,” 103. Italics original.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² King, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates,” 265.

independent entity. A world of relatives is set on and in *śūnyatā*; *śūnyatā* envelops, as it were, the whole world, and yet is in every object existing in the world.²²³

The important thing here is the difficulty of writing on/about emptiness because the language falls short. Emptiness must remain somewhat in inexpressible paradox because language reifies and signifies emptiness; negation helps further contextualize emptiness because it posits a negation in front of the language: (non)substantiation, (non)reification, etc. This is examined in more detail below in the considerations of how language functions in emptiness, and specifically with(in) negation.

B. Buddhist Traditions and Studies of Emptiness

1. The Complexity of Buddhism as a Natural Limit

A major world religion, Buddhism exists today in many fragmented traditions; this is true historically, as well. As in any tradition over 2,500 years old, Buddhism is today composed of many various major traditions and scores of schools within each sect. Like many other religious traditions, the history of sectarian fragmentation is almost as old as the tradition itself; the reasons for this vary widely: differing scriptural interpretations, geographic dissemination, cultural divides, and development over time. The sheer size and breadth of Buddhism causes a natural limit in discussion of what is “Buddhist” and what is not. As previously mentioned, the philosophical teachings, belief systems, and interpretation of Siddhartha Gautama make any basic discussion of “Buddhism” very difficult. The need for precision in terminology, historical factors, and primary source material are of the utmost importance; at best, when speaking of one generalized term, case studies can be applied to more closely examine one finite point within the entirety of the tradition.

Analytically, this may pose many problems, of which points more forcibly to the need to study an aspect of Buddhism within the specific context of paradigmatic change within the

²²³ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “The Philosophy of Zen,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 1951): 4.

tradition and how it relates to other teachings, both subtle and over-arching. In short, it is extraordinarily difficult to say anything other than that of generalities when it comes to conveying “Buddhist emptiness.” Barnhart frames this problem in a similar way:

Because if everything is mutually dependent, then the categories which comprise the same conceptual scheme have no closer a relationship than do the categories which feature in different conceptual schemes. A conceptual scheme or a tradition must maintain a relative autonomy from some range of alternatives; otherwise the concept is completely meaningless.²²⁴

Rather than the vastness of the tradition limiting critical inquiry, the advantage rests with the possibility of focusing a study specifically in a critical issue. The intention here is to provide a *cross-section* of Buddhism with the delineation of emptiness because time and space prohibit a comprehensive discussion of every Buddhist tradition and school’s interpretation of emptiness. However, a detailed discussion of carefully-chosen representative texts can provide a cross-section of Buddhist emptiness.

In some religious traditions, there are representative individuals whose analyses, ideas, and writings can be interpreted as reflections of the whole tradition. Buddhism, due to its various nuances, cultural divides, and historical changes, makes this process a bit more difficult. For example, even many of the Pāli texts attributed directly or indirectly to Siddhartha Gautama have come under textual criticism in possible doubt that surrounds even the earliest teachings. An individual, say Nāgārjuna, a major voice in ancient Buddhism with vast influence, is still not reflective of the entirety of the tradition; indeed, many ancient and modern voices contradict Nāgārjuna and his teachings. To that end, modern interpreters, like D.T. Suzuki or Masao Abe for example, still fall squarely within a certain sectarian interpretation of Buddhism. Thus, it is not prudent to use the nuances and interpretations of such a vast teaching as emptiness in just one interpreter; multiple voices from multiple

²²⁴ Barnhart, “Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability,” 650.

traditions must be cobbled together in a way that transcends generalities. This is true because even the ancient traditions held various interpretations of emptiness. As King highlights,

...in common with Theravāda *anattā*, emptiness represents two elements of an experiential nature: it is the experience of freedom from the bonds of ordinary self and space-time oriented personhood; and it springs out of the meditative discipline. To this might be added...though not exclusively, Mahāyāna feature: freedom to and in an unobstructed universe.²²⁵

2. Selected Buddhist Traditions that are Reflective of the Tradition

As argued above, it is impossible to discuss Buddhist emptiness in any kind of way other than that of overgeneralization if all traditions could be included in the discussion. Thus, it is necessary to delineate several larger traditions and discuss how the language of emptiness functions within each; from here, it is possible to connect this with a larger framework within the tradition. Each tradition acts as a “voice” within Buddhism, though the differences will be especially noted; some of the influential thinkers within each tradition will also be highlighted, again for the purpose of giving a more analytical voice to the entirety.²²⁶

For the purposes of time and space, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Zen have been selected to represent some specific Buddhist teachings of emptiness. These are chosen to represent an early tradition (Theravāda), a reformist tradition (Mahāyāna) and a further expansionist tradition (Zen in Japan and Ch’an in China).²²⁷ These three traditions were selected for their ancient relevance, breadth of teaching, and geographic span. Naturally, these are only three traditions amongst many, but they represent a cross-section of Buddhism.

In one sense, these representative texts are meant to convey the teachings and reforms of the Buddha as “...the concrete realization of a Truth which cannot be reduced to any precise formula, philosophy, or metaphysic...the Buddha too is primarily a ‘religious fact,’ a

²²⁵ King, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates,” 268. Italics original.

²²⁶ As an introductory text, Bibhuti Baruah’s *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism* (Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000), provides an excellent primer into the major sects within Buddhism and their various histories.

²²⁷ An excellent guide to summarize the major shifts in Buddhist traditions can be found in Nancy Wilson Ross’ *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

presence in the world which can...be explained by diverse philosophies but never wholly explained.”²²⁸ What is presented here are three different “approaches” that are meant to situate the context of emptiness in Buddhism.²²⁹ In another sense, it is important to delve into the specific details of emptiness, and that requires detailed study of a selected set of traditions. The ability to connect emptiness within Buddhism depends on the emphasis placed on emptiness within the tradition.

C. A Focus on the Conceptual: A Limitation of Language

Even though the scope of examination has been narrowed somewhat to the use of reflective traditions, the problem of how emptiness might be written remains. Specificity is important for analysis, but does this really convey the “nature” or “essence” of emptiness? Is there not always something lacking, something missing, something misappropriated when emptiness is put into words? It is acknowledged that any “essence” of emptiness is flawed and mistaken because emptiness is “essence-less.” However, if this fundamental problem of conveyance might be temporarily suspended – and it is acknowledged that all descriptors/descriptions are flawed from the outset – perhaps there might be something said beyond the limitations of language? What does this beyond look like? Is it, as will later be argued, an *aporia* of language? The attempt here is to work in/through that *aporia* and push the normal limits of language. If emptiness cannot be conveyed properly in language, perhaps it will at least allow for the asking of better questions within the tradition.

A discussion of emptiness, then, must be conceptual because it must bear in mind various clarifications and nuances. To fill out how these nuances inform the discussion, it is necessary to delineate emptiness into the experiential, meditative, and practical or

²²⁸ William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), xvii.

²²⁹ The term “approaches” is borrowed from Nancy Wilson Ross; she presents a similar method to cover various philosophical concepts within the general term “Buddhism” with specific traditions in Ross, *Buddhism*, introduction.

conventional usages.²³⁰ These clarifying delineations seek to convey continuity between emptiness that is experienced by a practitioner, the emptiness found in meditation, and emptiness as a philosophical construct that tears down conventional language.

These three general usages of emptiness are indicative of a need to further elucidate how emptiness functions within Buddhism; this is often unclear in the secondary literature that discusses emptiness. It is not possible to discuss emptiness in any kind of detail without first delineating how it generally functions within a given tradition. Specifically, experiential emptiness is a key aspect of Zen Buddhism: “Zen is a school of Buddhism and has developed from the enlightenment-experience of Śākyamuni. This experience is best expressed by the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, which means ‘emptiness.’”²³¹ Emptiness also carries an experiential aspect in other traditions. King argues that “...Śūnyatā also functions as a *reality* mode. As such it is sometimes non-committally designated as Tathatā, i.e., suchness, thatness.”²³² Emptiness “functions” as the experience that leads to enlightenment, though this is also experienced through the functionality of meditation. King explains,

...this inner-versus-outer time contrast climaxes in the mystical experience when the boundaries of self-hood and self-consciousness become obscured in a unitive awareness...such experiences...were basic to the growth of Śūnyatā as a *religious* entity; out of the Indian yogic timeless-spaceless trance-awareness came the conviction that such experiences were direct encounters with the Absolute Reality – that Reality which can only be slightly indicated by such a term as Śūnyatā.²³³

This connection, though central to understanding the function of emptiness, still remains different because experiential emptiness and meditative emptiness carry different connotations within the three examined traditions. This is done through a practical or conventional approach that clarifies various philosophical ideas and constructs through the

²³⁰ The use of the phrase “practical or conventional” is borrowed from Barnhart’s article, “Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability,” 653.

²³¹ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “The Philosophy of Zen,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 1951): 4. Italics original.

²³² King, “Śūnyatā as a Master Symbol,” 102-103. Italics original.

²³³ Ibid. 101. Italics original.

usage of emptiness. This is most clearly seen in Nāgārjuna's use of emptiness within the Mahāyāna tradition. In a recent article, Asaf Federman argues that there is an intrinsic connection between the Mahāyāna usage of skillful means and emptiness;²³⁴ this type of analysis presents a philosophical usage of emptiness to show connections with other teachings. As Williams helps clarify,

Madhyamaka is essentially not another form of epistemology or ontology, another philosophy like those which it opposes. Rather it aims to teach us to see things in a new and liberating way, a way that cuts all grasping – including grasping after truth, reason, and Madhyamaka itself – and therefore all egoistic preoccupations.²³⁵

Clarifying categories of usage are discussed below, but the initial approach to emptiness must take seriously the various usages within the traditions. There is much overlap and some categorical interdependence, but using an analytical delineation, much is to be gained by sorting out the various nuances within the wording.

II. The Internal Logic of Buddhism: Emptiness (Re)Examined

In order to delve into the internal logic of Buddhism, a specific lens must be employed; here the focus is on emptiness through a lens of negativity. The methodological question centers on the *function* of negativity in how the language informs teachings in/through/by emptiness.

A. Original Languages

One of the more obvious and documented difficulties in studying Buddhism is the sheer number of languages that are used in both primary and secondary sources. In an ancient context, knowledge of Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese would make an acceptable start, but even more languages are involved in the history of Buddhism. This presents something of a natural barrier unless the focus is on one particular context, tradition,

²³⁴ See Asaf Federman, "Literal Means and Hidden Meanings: A New Analysis of Skillful Means," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 59, no. 2 (April 2009): 125–141.

²³⁵ Paul Williams, "On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 2 (June 1991): 194.

or document. For a study such as this, it is simply not feasible to try to undertake a full examination of emptiness in all of the languages that it appears.²³⁶ Rather, the intention here is to examine the function of language, how it operates within particular contexts, the effect it has on other teachings, and what it might “mean” in terms of negativity. The larger intent here is to situate this function within the scope of negativity and how that might be further examined with Derridean *différance*.

In order to build a context for Buddhist emptiness, the earliest languages of Pāli and Sanskrit are briefly touched upon below. Like any other major teaching within Buddhism, emptiness has “changed,” either in focus, meaning, or context through history, but the original languages are examined briefly to establish the earliest meaning possible.

B. The Use of Pāli with Reference to *Suññata*

An early Buddhist liturgical language, Pāli was a Middle Indo-Aryan language originating in India.²³⁷ These early texts, divided into “three collections of texts,” or the *Tripitaka*, make up what is rendered the Pāli Canon.²³⁸ Early English analysts like T. Michelson highlight the difficulty of making general assumptions about Pāli renderings as having “existed over too long a stretch of time to expect uniformity in every detail; Pāli being contemporaneous with Buddha is naturally more archaic than the Asokan dialects...”²³⁹

Michelson goes on to demonstrate that the age, widespread usage of Pāli, and various texts

²³⁶ The use of texts is limited to English translations as this project is not primarily concerned with particular nuances in translation; rather, the primary concern here is with the function of negativity in language of emptiness.

²³⁷ The early twentieth century saw an increased interest in Pāli studies. This is discussed in various articles from the early parts of that century; see especially T. Michelson, “Walleser on the Home of PĀli [sic],” *Language*, vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1928): 101.

²³⁸ Whitfield Foy names the three divisions: “(1) *the Vinaya Pitaka*, (2) *the Sutta-Pitaka* and (3) *the Abidhamma-Pitaka*” in *Man’s Religious Quest* (London: The Open University, 1978), 171. Additionally, Hajime Nakamura’s *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 22-60 is especially useful for a full discussion (with a supporting, extensive bibliography) regarding the Pāli language and the *Tripitaka*.

²³⁹ Michelson, “Walleser on the Home of PĀli [sic],” 101.

written in Pāli make interpretation of early Buddhist texts especially precarious.²⁴⁰ In a similar article, Walter Clark argues forcibly that while many early Buddhist texts were written in Pāli, this should not automatically disqualify other linguistic expressions of Buddhism from equal measure of study.²⁴¹ However, as it is important to Pāli studies, Clark goes on to argue, “[w]e do not know in what dialect Buddha himself taught.”²⁴² He continues to suggest that the history of the Pāli canon cannot be assumed to have first existed as a continuous set of texts, but rather he points to early sources that suggest that the Pāli canon existed firstly as a loose grouping of texts, “partly by subject matter and partly by reference to different types of verse and prose.”²⁴³ Thus, while much of the earliest sources attesting to Buddhism do exist in some form or variant of Pāli, it is unfair to assume that Pāli is the the most authoritative, comprehensive, or conclusive source of Buddhist textual evidence.²⁴⁴

In many modern English translations, the Sanskrit version of “emptiness,” or *śūnyatā*, is often used. However, the Pāli references to *suññata*, are used in Theravāda literature because it represents an earlier etymological referent. Whereas the Mahāyāna tradition

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 105.

²⁴¹ Walter Eugene Clark, “Some Problems in the Criticism of the Sources for Early Buddhist History,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 23, no. 2 (April 1930): 121-122.

²⁴² Ibid. 132. Clark goes further to suggest that the Buddha taught in Māgadhī because this would have been the spoken dialect of northern India in the time of the Buddha.

²⁴³ Ibid. 134. Clark continues: “A large part of the Pali canon consists of mingled prose and verse. It seems clear that on the whole the verse is older linguistically than the prose, unless in some cases verses were composed later in imitation of an archaic style.” Ibid. 138.

²⁴⁴ Much of the primacy of Pāli studies can be attributed to T.W. Rhys Davids and his wife, Caroline A.F. Rhys Davids. As Judith Snodgrass recently highlighted, “Their contribution includes the almost complete publication of the Pāli canon, a Pāli dictionary, numerous expository works, and the training of a large number of colleagues and students to perpetuate their influence.” Judith Snodgrass, “Defining Modern Buddhism: Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids and the Pāli Text Society,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2007), 180. One of the most important contributions made to the study of Pāli was the understanding that, “even at the most generous estimate, they had been written at least a century or more after the passing of the Buddha. They were the work of his followers from a much later date, shaped by their desire to express their reverence for him.” Ibid. 190. However, as Snodgrass highlights, “The great value of Buddhism to [T.W. Rhys Davids] was that the vast collection of its extant sacred texts preserved a record of the evolution of its religious thought from its development out of Brahmanism of the fifth century BCE right through to the present.” Ibid. 191. This is important to the shape and understanding of the Pāli texts because it represents a specific detachment (historically and objectively) from the original teachings of the Buddha. As Snodgrass highlights, the work of Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids provided the foundation of early Pāli text translations into English; this is important work that further promoted the primacy and importance of Pāli as authoritative in early Buddhist studies.

focuses heavily on *śūnyatā*, references in Theravāda tend to be more subtle. A various general translation of *suñña* is “empty,” but the nuances are far more complicated.²⁴⁵ Winston King suggests that the meaning of *suññata* (at least in the Theravāda tradition) shares meaning with *anattā* because “emptiness represents two elements of an experiential nature: it is the experience of freedom from the bonds of ordinary self and space-time oriented personhood; and it springs out of the meditative disciple.”²⁴⁶ Kenneth Inada gives a similar description when he writes, “...that relational-origination, in its unique sense of voidness, refers to a Buddhist notion of temporality. In this sense, temporality is that experience which is coterminous with reality of things as they are.”²⁴⁷ Inada goes further in his definition and interpretation when he says,

...it is void (*suñña*) with a twelvefold voidness (that is, reference to the sense faculties and the sense objects, including the mind and its objects) and spins on and on...*Śūnyatā* is what makes the two realms coexistent, not side by side, but as two sides of the same reality. Thus relational-origination spans the saṃsāric and nibbānic realms, because it is in essence a voidal, undifferentiated process.²⁴⁸

In both King and Inada’s interpretation of the term for “empty,” the experiential plays a major part in understanding the term. Also with this understanding, both point to a knowledge factor whereby reality is revealed in emptiness. This is further connected and elucidated by Donald Swearer’s understanding of K.N. Jayatilleke’s description when he explains: “...in the Pāli texts the two differing levels of understanding – direct (*nītattha*) and indirect (*neyyattha*) – lead to one truth. This truth or state of being cannot be described or understood rationally, but it can be realized and attained.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1991), 414.

²⁴⁶ King, “The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates,” 268.

²⁴⁷ Kenneth K. Inada, “Time and Temporality: A Buddhist Approach,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 1974), 177.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. Italics original.

²⁴⁹ Donald K. Swearer, “Two Types of Saving Knowledge in the Pāli Suttas,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 22, no. 4 (October 1972): 356. Italics original.

An interesting observation about how modern interpreters understand emptiness is that they often find connections with other doctrines to make sense of emptiness. Thus, emptiness does not seem to say much on its own; rather, an examination of other teachings is necessary for a more complete understanding. This is true for the opposite: emptiness makes other doctrines coherent. For example, Swearer makes this connection: “The insight of *pañña*, therefore, may speak in descriptive terms of impermanence, conditionality and so on, but the ‘vision’ aspect of *pañña* makes only such simple assertions as emptiness (*suñña*) and signlessness (*animittatā*).”²⁵⁰ He goes on to connect this with “freedom of the mind or consciousness (*cetovimutti*).”²⁵¹ The larger context Swearer builds with his analysis centers on the experience of emptiness, namely that in “freedom.” He elucidates: “This freedom may be delineated in the *suttas* in the sequence of *appamānā* (immeasurable), *ākiñcañña* (nothingness), *suññata* (emptiness) and *animittatā* (signlessness).”²⁵² Swearer’s analysis contributes to a better understanding of emptiness because he rightly points to intricate usage; he highlights how emptiness plays a central role in understanding other teachings. Abraham Vélez de Cea makes a similar connection in his understanding of Nancy McCagney’s argument: “According to the Theravāda tradition, in the abode of emptiness, the liberated one is aware of the empty aspect of *nibbāna* and enjoys the fruition of attainment of arahantship, so emptiness here refers to the experience of *nibbāna*.”²⁵³ Such research is indicative of the interconnectedness of emptiness with other significant teachings.

Some recent discussions of *suñña* tend to focus on how the Pāli scriptures were interpreted, especially in the later understanding of Nāgārjuna’s use (either in an orthodox or

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 367. Italics original.

²⁵¹ Ibid. Italics original.

²⁵² Ibid. 367-368. Italics original. Swearer goes on: “The above limited references appear to indicate that salvation-knowledge as *suñña* denotes not only the negation of form associated with phenomenal world but also a reality beyond form. *Pañña* perceives this reality as *suññatā*, not mere emptiness, but as that ultimately real which gives meaning to the world of multiplicity.” Ibid. 368. Italics original. This is an important clarification of Swearer’s argument because he further connects emptiness with other central teachings.

²⁵³ de Cea, “Emptiness in the Pāli *Suttas* and the Question of Nāgārjuna’s Orthodoxy,” 508.

heterodox way) of the Sanskrit “śūnyatā.” A short discussion of Sanskrit with direct reference to the usage of śūnyatā is necessary to not only pattern how the original texts interpret it, but also to engage in the modern discussion of how emptiness is used in either a heterodox or orthodox way.

C. The Use of Sanskrit with Reference to Śūnyatā

An early Indo-Aryan language²⁵⁴ with widespread use amongst the first Buddhist writers, Sanskrit is the language with which the most commonly used rendering of emptiness is used: śūnyatā.²⁵⁵ Though Sanskrit has been studied in the West for some time, generally, most studies center on the vast body of literature affiliated with Hinduism, specifically in Vedic literature.²⁵⁶ However, it is out of this religious and literary tradition that Buddhism arose, so the importance of Sanskrit to the early written formation of Buddhism is invaluable.²⁵⁷ It is also important to note that the widespread use of Sanskrit led to not only a vast body of Indian literature, but also its survival into a modern (albeit altered) language.²⁵⁸ Though space and time limit a full discussion of the development of the Sanskrit language, it is important to note Buddhism’s usage of Sanskrit as a reformation religion based directly out of Hinduism means much of the vocabulary, linguistic nuances, and philosophical assumptions are borrowed, both directly and indirectly, from Vedic sources.²⁵⁹ For that matter, there is much borrowed directly in other Indic languages and dialects, including Pāli.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁴ For a general discussion of Sanskrit’s Aryan influence, see T. Burrow’s *The Sanskrit Language* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 1-2.

²⁵⁵ George Cardona and Dhanesh Jain, *The Indo-Aryan Languages* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 106.

²⁵⁶ For an excellent, early study of the transmission of Indian literature written in Sanskrit, then translated into English, see Arthur MacDonell’s *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1900), introduction.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 7.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 8. Burrow also notes that the importance of “three thousand years of continuous linguistic history.” Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language*, 2.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. see 37ff.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 35ff.

Definitions for *śūnyatā* vary somewhat, though most modern interpreters and ancient commentators seem to agree that it is some version of “emptiness.” Winston King notes that it translates into “Void, Emptiness, and Nothingness.”²⁶¹ The various nuances between the aforementioned words are not fleshed out in King’s work, though the general philosophical meaning of “emptiness” suffices to his understanding that “it is by definition utterly beyond all specification, or direct symbolization.”²⁶² Thus, for King the deeper meaning of *śūnyatā* is wrapped up in it “as [a] matrix or ground of symbolic being in which all of the other Mahayanist Buddhist symbols live, move, and have *their* being.”²⁶³ George Rupp indicates that the original Mahāyāna teaching of *śūnyatā* centered on “the traditional Buddhist insistence that there is no perduring substantial self...affirmed as applicable to the whole of reality.” King and Rupp point to the greater meaning of the (originally) Indian Mahāyāna tradition and one of its foundational thinkers, Nāgārjuna, whose central work dealt primarily with *śūnyatā*.²⁶⁴ Roger Corless’ reading of Nāgārjuna takes these meanings as an explanation to “direct our attention towards reality-as-it-is.”²⁶⁵ Furthermore, Corless expands on Nāgārjuna’s usage of emptiness insofar as he says Nāgārjuna uses *śūnyatā* “to describe reality without describing it...This is not a neologism, but his use of it is distinctive. It is found in the Rg-Veda with the meaning of ‘loneliness, desolateness’...It always means absence of some sort, and for Nāgārjuna it means the absence of *concepts about* reality.”²⁶⁶ Corless here makes an important etymological connection between the Indian words for emptiness to assert the meaning Nāgārjuna uses. Barnhart takes the implication of Nāgārjuna’s thought to another logical extreme when he asserts: “Far from avoiding the

²⁶¹ King, “Śūnyatā as a Master Symbol,” 97.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid. 98.

²⁶⁴ The usage of the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* is most used by Nāgārjuna in his analysis of the emptiness of reality, things, etc. The analysis of the etymology of the term thus focuses heavily on Nāgārjuna’s interpretation of the term.

²⁶⁵ Roger J. Corless, “Speaking the Unspeakable: Negation as the Way in Nicholas of Cusa and Nāgārjuna,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 2 (1982): 109.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 109. Italics original.

criticism that *śūnyatā* disables such truths, Nāgārjuna argues quite to the contrary that only in the equation of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* [dependence] can we hope to give these truths any alethic status.”²⁶⁷ Ewing Chinn makes a similar point in his thesis that “there is no paradox or problem of self-refutation, because the true doctrine that Nāgārjuna refers to is not *śūnyatā* but the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent arising or origination).”²⁶⁸ Hence, Chinn and Barnhart point to the interpretation that *śūnyatā* is not a “thing,” even a doctrine, in itself, but it is, rather, a pointer to other teachings. Perhaps most relevant to this discussion is Williams’ outline of the linguistic problems at hand: “One of the principal problems with the linguistic interpretation of Madhyamaka is that it requires a distinction between meaning and reference. Words, it is maintained, can have meaning without referring to any extra-linguistic reality.”²⁶⁹ Recent debate in Nāgārjuna’s interpretation of *śūnyatā* has centered on his usage, with respect as to whether or not his terminology was utilized in an orthodox or heterodox way. Nancy McCagney alleges that his interpretation of *śūnyatā* is fundamentally heterodox because,

Whereas the term “*suññatā*” in the Pāli Canon is well translated by the term “emptiness,” Nāgārjuna’s usage is inspired by the imagery of the sky or space (*ākāśa*) in early *prajñāpāramitā* literature, particularly the *Astasāhasrikā*. The *Asta* conception of *ākāśa* is distinct from ancient and modern Western conceptions and refers not to a void or vacuum, but to something like the medieval Western conception of space as an ether. But unlike the Western conception, *ākāśa* in the *Asta* is a luminous ether, filled with light.²⁷⁰

This presents an interesting, and perhaps heterodox, view of Nāgārjuna’s interpretation of *śūnyatā* as distinct from earlier Sanskrit references. Taking issue with McCagney’s point, de Cea draws upon the earliest nomenclature: “The terms *suñña* and *suññaka*, in what seems to be their original meaning, refer to the physical absence of something. From this original

²⁶⁷ Barnhart, “Śūnyatā, Textualism, and Incommensurability,” 651. Italics original.

²⁶⁸ Ewing Chinn, “Nāgārjuna’s Fundamental Doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda*” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 51, no. 1 (January 2001): 54.

²⁶⁹ Williams, “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought,” 196.

²⁷⁰ Nancy McCagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), xix-xx. Italics original.

physical meaning, the usage of emptiness was extended to apply metaphorically to the psychophysical components of beings.”²⁷¹ De Cea goes on to explain, “Emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* also has the philosophical meaning of nonself or absence of self...there seems to be a relationship between seeing the emptiness of the world, the practice of mindfulness, and the destruction of views of self.”²⁷² De Cea does not go so far as to defend Nāgārjuna’s orthodoxy; he does not think McCagney has provided sufficient argumentation as to the heterodox interpretation of *śūnyatā*.²⁷³

While a more complete analysis of Nāgārjuna’s interpretation of *śūnyatā* is provided below, it is important to note that his widespread use of the Sanskrit term “popularized” the concept, as much later thinking was based on his understanding of emptiness. Thus, what is known today about the Sanskrit term follows greatly from Nāgārjuna’s interpretation.

D. The Language of Emptiness

The language of emptiness is not only wrapped up in the intricacies of the history of Buddhism, but also with the signification of other concepts like enlightenment and dependent causation amongst others. What a brief study of the earliest references to emptiness show is this interconnectedness and the difficulty of expressing the meaning of emptiness. Though many of the earliest references discuss emptiness in terms of a void or a vacuum, what does this really mean? Does this correspond to other references that describe emptiness in terms of ether, with references to light? Not to belittle the question, but is emptiness (if put on a spectrum of senses, for the sake of argument) a dazzling infinite light or a bottomless void of night? What the language of emptiness shows are that these descriptions are inadequate at best and mis-constructed at worst.

²⁷¹ de Cea, “Emptiness in the Pāli *Suttas* and the Question of Nāgārjuna’s Orthodoxy,” 509. Italics original.

²⁷² Ibid. Italics original.

²⁷³ Ibid. 523.

What makes a study of emptiness so difficult is not only the breadth of history, languages, and contexts, but also that emptiness breaks down language in a way that shows the faultiness of conventional logic, reason, and signification. Emptiness almost requires a new language, a moving, fluid, dynamic language. This “new” language might be examined through the lens of negativity because negativity allows for a specific lens into the function of language, but also a construction of language that is fluid and dynamic.

III. A Language of Negativity: Emptiness

A. Writing Emptiness: A Context

The central problem to this analysis is how to speak/write/signify emptiness in a way that is non-reified, that conveys non-substantiality, yet bears the same meaning that emptiness has upon the inner logic of Buddhism. To work through this problem, the development of a way to establish how the various voices of Buddhism contribute to the entire spectrum of Buddhist thought is necessary; this is carried out, specifically, through the lens of how negativity works in the language of Buddhist thought.

Furthermore, three traditions of Buddhism are selected to contribute to the specificity that is necessary for such an analysis. The intent is to utilize the methodological strategy of a cross-sectional approach to emptiness because this will help fill out the various and complex “voices” within the tradition. This will help set the backdrop to the discussion of Derridean deconstruction in Chapter Four, wherein the voices of the various traditions are of vital importance to contextualization. Of further highlight here is the strategic choice to outline the differences in such traditions; the point is to stay true to the complexities and nuances of Buddhist emptiness. This is accomplished through the examination of negativity in the language that forms the three major traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Zen/Ch’an Buddhism.

The intent here is to approach the task of examining Buddhist emptiness through the prism of three separate traditions in order to see how the difference(s) of negativity function in the internal language structures of each.

B. The Problem of Existence: A Definition of *Śūnyatā*

Though the basic translation of *śūnyatā* is “emptiness,” the complexity of the term might be measured in the appropriation of emptiness as the absence of a self, or it might refer to the lack of substance of all existence. For that matter, it might refer to all things being devoid of independent existence, or it might refer to the commonality of all existence as (a) “being” of dependent causation. The point here is that *śūnyatā* is a complex term that wraps up various nuances of negativity in it. A working definition of *śūnyatā* is necessary to carry on an analysis with any kind of depth; here, while “emptiness” is certain kept intact, the deeper problem is that of *absence*. In order to get beyond a definition and more into the deeper meaning of *śūnyatā*, it is necessary to take into consideration the negative function of the term: *śūnyatā* fundamentally expresses absence; whether as the absence of an independent, uncaused existence or the lack of self (or, *anātman* in the earliest texts), *śūnyatā* stands in negation of other terms because it expresses the absence of substance. To quickly sum a working definition of *śūnyatā*, the term applies to questions of existence where it expresses, through negativity, the absence of substance. While this working definition will be expressed in various ways, a more full explanation of the connection between emptiness and absence is in the concluding remarks of this chapter.

C. Major Themes of Emptiness: An Assessment of Language of Negativity

Apart from an examination of various Buddhist traditions through the strategic use of a cross-sectional approach, further categories of assessment are necessary to situate emptiness not only in the internal logic of Buddhism, but also within a structure of negative language. This means that a study of the major themes of emptiness is necessary to fill out how the

structure can be used in the later analysis of emptiness in relation to Derridean *différance*.

These categories are not exhaustive but rather representative of the ideas in the earliest extant texts as well as more modern secondary sources. The selected categories include liberation, rejection of reification, non-duality, and enlightenment.

1. Liberation

a. *Anātman* and Emptiness: Language of Negativity

A central and foundational concept to Buddhism is that existence is relational to suffering of sentient beings. Suffering might be due, for example, to craving in terms of existence, delusion to the true nature of things, or karmic consequence for previous action, but the consequence is the same: suffering begets further suffering and this is intrinsically related to the condition of what it means to exist. Thus, from the earliest texts, the elimination or liberation from suffering is a key component of Buddhist teaching. It is interesting to note here that suffering is often discussed in terms of tying experiential desire to that of existential concerns; the *Cūlasunnata Sutta*, an early Theravāda text, describes the monk's experience of liberation as having "...his mind...liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance."²⁷⁴ There are a few points of immediate concern here: the mind is wrapped up in this liberation, so it is integrally involved in the monk's freedom from existence, but the freedom extends to complete cessation:

Such talk as deals with effacement, as favours the mind's release, and which leads to complete disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and Nibbāna, that is, talk on wanting little, on contentment, seclusion, aloofness from society, arousing energy, virtue, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance...²⁷⁵

The adjectives used to describe an all-encompassing liberation leads to cessation are fascinating because they are far-ranging in their philosophical implications. Certainly the

²⁷⁴ *Middle Length Discourses*, 969.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 974.

immediate implication is that liberation is of central importance to Buddhist teaching.

However, here it is important to trace back to the root of bondage, of suffering; with that comes about the uniquely-Buddhist teaching of the *anātman*, or no-self.

In trying to get to a better understanding of Buddhist liberation, it is important to specify *who* is being liberated; coupled with the Buddhist teaching of *anātman*, this begs the question of *who* or *what* is being liberated? Is it some disembodied self, the mind, or a person's entire essence? These questions, while attempting to answer certain aspects of liberation, inadvertently miss the point. The teaching of emptiness is intrinsically related to *anātman* because the self is substantially no-thing; so who or what is being liberated is a tangential question; the better phrasing might be the (non)what or the (non)who is being liberated. For, as Winston L. King argues that "...emptiness is neither substantial Absolute Being nor nihilistic nonbeing, but somehow transcendent-immanent in 'being' and 'non-being,'" ²⁷⁶ then, too, the question of liberation must be one that existentially pivots not on the who or what, but on the empty nature of human phenomena; here liberation means "to enter and abide in emptiness internally by giving no attention to all signs." ²⁷⁷ Donald Lopez makes the connection much more plainly: "...all phenomena are falsely imagined to have a self, a soul, an 'own-being', a reality which they, in fact, lack...all phenomena in the universe are devoid of any essence or intrinsic existence; indeed, it is the very absence of such an essence that is the true nature of things." ²⁷⁸ The language here is filled with negations: "devoid," "lack," and "absence" help express the deeper truth that all things are essentially empty; thus, the connection with liberation is that in order for one to achieve liberation, the key insight

²⁷⁶ King, "The Existential Nature of Buddhist Ultimates," 270.

²⁷⁷ *Middle Length Discourses*, 972.

²⁷⁸ Donald S. Lopez, Jr. ed., *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 450; 464. Italics removed.

that all things are devoid of their own substance is necessary.²⁷⁹ For, as the Mahāyāna *Perfection of Wisdom* sūtra expands, “Through the fact of there being no personal soul, no living being, no person, that utmost, full and perfect awakening is fully and perfectly awakened to as identical with all meritorious things.”²⁸⁰ Elsewhere, in *The Kāṣyapaparivarta*, the connection between emptiness and the self must be understood properly: “It is not...that emptiness leads to the annihilation of personhood; persons themselves are empty and emptiness itself is empty, absolutely empty, empty in the past, empty in the future, empty in the present.”²⁸¹ This is further substantiated in Nāgārjuna’s *Dharmadhātustava* when he states that, “The mind is purified by [contemplating] the three: ‘impermanent, suffering, and empty’. The quality that purifies the mind best, however, is the absence of intrinsic nature.”²⁸² Again the overriding theme here is the lack of intrinsic nature, the absence of some-thing, a no-thing, is that which leads to liberation. The functions of the negations are for “purification” in a way that expresses the paradoxical fullness of emptiness. These passages help briefly elucidate the problem of the no-self in relation to liberation in the bigger scope of emptiness. However, to further explore how the no-self is treated in ancient Buddhist texts, it is beneficial to turn to Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* to fill out the inter-relationships between the no-self and liberation.

²⁷⁹ Lopez makes this connection even more so: “The sūtra is, above all, a discourse on the wisdom that shatters our ordinary conceptions, returning again and again to the negation of the fundamental elements of the dharma, suggesting that it is the very absence of self that is their true nature.” Ibid. 452. Italics removed.

²⁸⁰ “The Perfection of Wisdom,” from the manuscript of the *Vajracchedikā*, trans. Gregory Schopen, in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 459.

²⁸¹ “The Kāṣyapaparivarta: A Mahāyānasūtra of the Ratnakūṭa Class: Edited in the Original Sanskrit in Tibetan and in Chinese,” trans. Jonathan Silk, in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 353.

²⁸² Nāgārjuna, “Dharmadhātustava,” trans. Donald Lopez in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 468.

b. Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: The Paradox of the Emptiness of Emptiness

For Nāgārjuna, the basic inter-relationship of things is best described as dependent arising, or, simply that every phenomenal thing is caused by something else.²⁸³ L. Stafford Betty aptly shows how Nāgārjuna consistently affirms, "'emptiness,' the true state of all empirical things, is diametrically opposed to 'self-existence.'"²⁸⁴ Betty's analysis is valuable here because it establishes the interior tension between what conditionally exists as a phenomenal "thing" and that is understood as fundamentally empty. Nāgārjuna describes dependent arising in terms of "arising, abiding, and ceasing."²⁸⁵ However, even these categories are ultimately empty of their own substance. David Kalupahana summarizes this point when he says, "Causality, according to Nāgārjuna, is pure relativity, and this relativity is synonymous with emptiness."²⁸⁶ Nāgārjuna's thesis of emptiness is made to prevent the logical conclusions of equating the properties of dependent arising with any kind of (self)existence, for "Neither an existent nor a nonexistent / Can be properly said to arise. / As it is taught before with / 'For neither an existent nor a nonexistent.'"²⁸⁷ Nāgārjuna's careful use of negative language here, as throughout the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, serve to show how phenomena are, ultimately, empty.

In Nāgārjuna's thought, causal relationships function on the logic that nothing arises nor not-arises. For this causal relationship demonstrates that nothing is "permanent" and thus there are no "fixed essential natures."²⁸⁸ Following this logic to its conclusion means

²⁸³ Nāgārjuna presents this fairly clearly: "The arising of arising only gives rise / To the basic arising. / The arising of the basic arising / Gives rise to arising." Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. with commentary Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18, Chapter VII: 4.

²⁸⁴ L. Stafford Betty, "Nāgārjuna's Masterpiece: Logical, Mystical, Both or Neither?" *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 33, no. 2 (April 1983): 127.

²⁸⁵ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 331 (Garfield commentary) 18, Chapter VII: 3.

²⁸⁶ David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii, 1976), 137.

²⁸⁷ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 20-21, Chapter VII: 20.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 169. Garfield's commentary on Chapter VII.

asserting that if emptiness shows that nothing is "fixed" or "permanent," then everything is characterized by "arising, abiding, and ceasing." The internal logic is characterized by negation, by impermanence and the no/never/not-lasting of emptiness. Ruegg helps unpack this logic:

...to say that something is neither *A* nor non-*A* (\bar{A}) does not represent an attempt on the part of the Mādhyamika to define some entity (*bhāva*, i.e. a thing possessing *svabhāva*) that is neither *A* nor \bar{A} (i.e. indeterminate), but rather a way of stating the Buddhist theory of conditionship in terms of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness of own being (*svabhāvaśūnyatā*) and non-substantiality of all factors (*dharmanairātmya*).²⁸⁹

Nāgārjuna's thesis is that nothing exists nor not-exists independently. The further implication in this argument is that emptiness, if conceived either as a descriptor, or even as an "essence" of something else, is *also* empty. Williams makes a very careful distinction here between emptiness and things that are empty:

Emptiness is not itself the same as the world which is empty, the two truths are not literally the same thing, emptiness and the thing which is empty could not be literally the same otherwise cowherders would see emptiness and be enlightened.²⁹⁰

If emptiness has no inherent existence, because it has no essential essence, then it, too, is held in this causal relationship. Garfield lucidly summarizes this point: "...as far as one analyzes, one finds only dependence, relativity, and emptiness and *their* dependence, relativity, and emptiness."²⁹¹

Nāgārjuna shows that because emptiness is itself empty, the Four Noble Truths are affirmed in their path to liberation and cessation.²⁹² Nāgārjuna uses the powerful logic of the emptiness of emptiness to question: "If suffering, arising, and / Ceasing are nonexistent, / By

²⁸⁹ Ruegg, "The Uses of the Four Positions of the 'Catuṣkoṭi and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism," 11. Italics original.

²⁹⁰ Paul Williams, "On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought," 204.

²⁹¹ Ibid. 177. Emphasis added.

²⁹² Nāgārjuna sees the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths as the logical predecessor of his system because it says that all things are dependently originated, and thus all things are empty. Nāgārjuna's analysis leads him to the logic of the emptiness of emptiness because cessation, according to the Four Noble Truths, is what is ultimately sought.

what path could one seek / To obtain the cessation of suffering?"²⁹³ Even then, Williams clarifies, "...*śūnyatā* must refer to an entity's being empty of something, although this is an interpretation of *śūnyatā* which was specifically denied by the Madhyamaka."²⁹⁴ Williams' clarification argues for Nāgārjuna's own position to be bracketed as neither a thesis nor a non-thesis. As Nāgārjuna cogently demonstrates in the twenty-ninth verse of his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, he does not state a position: "If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me."²⁹⁵ This refutation allows Nāgārjuna to deal with the semantics that come between the *meaning* of emptiness and holding a position *on* emptiness. As Ruegg argues, "...the fact, or truth, of the interdependent origination of things is then referred to by the term *śūnyatā*, emptiness, a designation not belonging to the object-language applied conditionally to this state of affairs."²⁹⁶ Indeed, this is entirely necessary, as Jan Westerhoff argues, to defend the thesis of universal emptiness, including the emptiness of the thesis itself.²⁹⁷

By bracketing the language used in the emptiness of emptiness, Nāgārjuna shows a middle way towards liberation and cessation. Though his bracketed language navigates "between" affirmation and negation, Nāgārjuna's final analysis stands the test of logic: he affirms the Buddhist concept of the path to *nirvāṇa* as the stripping away of assumptions, falsity, and delusion. Included is the attainment of liberation through viewing conventional and phenomenal truths as essentially the same.²⁹⁸ For Nāgārjuna, the doctrine of dependent origination shows the logical fallacy of the delusion of existence as permanent. As Williams

²⁹³ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 70, Chapter XXIV: 25.

²⁹⁴ Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," 8.

²⁹⁵ Jan Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63.

²⁹⁶ Ruegg, "The Uses of the Four Positions of the Catuskoṭi and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism," 11. Italics original.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. 11.

²⁹⁸ "If there is essence, the whole world / Will be unarising, unceasing, / And static. The entire phenomenal world / Would be immutable...If it (the world) were not empty, / Then action would be without profit. / The act of ending suffering and / Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist." Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 72. Chapter XXIV: 38 and 39.

helps clarify, “An entity seen as dependent and thereby illusory is understood according to its *paratantra* aspect; its illusory nature is realised, like the Madhyamaka *śūnyatā*, due to dependent origination.”²⁹⁹ This doctrine, coupled with the logic of conventional and phenomenal truths as empty, allows Nāgārjuna to affirm the path to cessation through the ultimate realization of emptiness: “Whoever sees dependent arising / Also sees suffering / And its arising / And its cessation as well as the path.”³⁰⁰

The greater point here might be Nāgārjuna’s emptiness, at least as far as liberation is concerned, is found in the limits of language, where language collapses. This is important analytically because ultimately, the emptiness of emptiness exposes delusion through the emptiness of conventional and phenomenal truth. Williams lucidly sets out the logic here:

In terms of existence, emptiness has as much real existence as anything else. It is the true, really true, way of things, inasmuch as it is the way things really are. In this sense it is an ultimate truth. But if emptiness itself is searched for, then...emptiness is not found and therefore there is emptiness of emptiness. *Emptiness is the truth of emptiness itself; emptiness really is empty of inherent existence.*³⁰¹

Garfield's analysis of this conclusion helps contextualize the greater point:

But if...we treat ourselves, others, and our values as empty, there is hope and a purpose to life. For then, in the context of impermanence and dependence, human action and knowledge make sense, and moral and spiritual progress become possible. It is only in the context of *ultimate nonexistence* that *actual existence* makes any sense at all.³⁰²

Nāgārjuna’s summation suggests that existence, whatever that may entail, operates in a type of bracketed dialectic because conventional and phenomenal existences are not without emptiness, and conversely, “emptiness is the truth of emptiness itself.”

The Zen/Ch’an traditions help push the logic into the experiential (specifically) and into consciousness (tangentially); this is of importance to understanding how emptiness

²⁹⁹ Williams, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka,” 9. Italics original.

³⁰⁰ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Chapter XXIV: 40.

³⁰¹ Williams, “On Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought,” 207. Emphasis added.

³⁰² Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 318. Garfield's commentary. Italics are original.

works within the confines of logical negativity in terms of liberation. More specifically, a discussion of the experience of emptiness helps address the nuances of expressing emptiness in terms of negative language.

c. Zen and the Experience of Emptiness

As previously discussed, there are multiple ways to address how emptiness might be conveyed conceptually. In Zen, the emphasis is often expressed in terms of experience, so a different way of conceptualizing negative language in emptiness is necessary; while not a paradigm shift as such, the point here is to round out the conceptualization within terms that are utilized in Zen. C. Lawson Crowe argues that Zen, as a development of earlier Mahāyāna Buddhism, holds emptiness and enlightenment together as the paradox of experience; furthermore, this contributes to a discussion of liberation because the earlier traditions point to the importance of realizing emptiness in all things and the enlightenment that may come from it. Crowe connects key Mahāyāna ideas with how Zen experience shapes the language of emptiness and enlightenment:

These [Mahāyāna] *Sūtras* teach that the mind attains *nirvāṇa* when it comprehends the emptiness of all things. Reality is essentially void, and this experience of the void is what is referred to in the Zen doctrine of “seeing into one’s true nature.” This “seeing” is not “seeing something.” It is a state of no-seeing, no-consciousness, and no-mind. Strictly speaking, nothing can be predicated of “no-consciousness.”³⁰³

Crowe describes Zen experience as “mystical” insofar that experience “ends, paradoxically, by viewing the concrete as essentially formless and empty.”³⁰⁴ Nieda suggests a similar interpretation of holding these two teachings together experientially because, “...one can perceive ‘nothing’ and approach the fresh truth of Buddha through ‘nothing’ and one can release oneself from the crowded world of earth, and be open to expand oneself toward the

³⁰³ C. Lawson Crowe, “On the ‘Irrationality’ of Zen,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January 1965): 34.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 36.

infinitely broad sky.”³⁰⁵ While the earlier Mahāyāna tradition relies on something like experience (to realize emptiness in all things), it is not spelled out as such; rather, the later Zen tradition broadly connects experience with enlightenment as central to liberation. Hideo Kishimoto argues that the development of Zen from Mahāyāna thought included the teaching of the Buddha that “...enlightenment and nirvāṇa, were almost synonymous. To become fully enlightened meant to disappear from this world.”³⁰⁶ Yet, what seems to depart from Buddhist teaching is the possibility of unification in enlightenment: “[Zen] emphasizes a unifying absolutist awareness and thus dissolves separative individualism.”³⁰⁷ Even further, King pushes the argument to suggest, “The aim is to go beyond mere one-pointed mindfulness to a fully existential realization of *anicca-anatta-dukkha* (impermanence-emptiness-suffering) in one’s own body-mind totality.”³⁰⁸ As a preliminary suggestion, the synonymy of emptiness and enlightenment means, at the basic level, recognition of the “uniqueness...in the elimination of the stages in the journey to *nirvāṇa*.”³⁰⁹

Here a major idea of liberation is important to note: whereas in the earlier traditions, the language that makes up liberation is primarily negative (realizing non-substantiality, etc.) while the language of liberation in the Zen tradition is seemingly positive insofar as emptiness eliminates/creates a quasi-unification/falling away. To flesh out this paradox, D.T. Suzuki posits that *śūnyatā* prevents “contradiction” in Zen experience because the totality of *śūnyatā* is “absolutely one.”³¹⁰ The contradiction that is foremost in Suzuki’s thinking is the problem of subject-object relationships. He proposes that “*śūnyatā* is experienced only when it is both subject and object;” this “intellectual reconstruction” is a logic whereby both

³⁰⁵ Rokusaburō Nieda, “‘Nothing’ in Zen: in Comparison with Christian Eschatology and ‘Nothing’ in European Philosophy,” *Numen*, vol. 9, fasc. 1 (January 1962): 40.

³⁰⁶ Hideo Kishimoto, “Mahāyāna Buddhism and Japanese Thought,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 4, no. 3, (October 1954), 217.

³⁰⁷ Winston L. King, “A Comparison of Theravada and Zen Buddhist Meditational Methods and Goals,” *History of Religions*, vol. 9, no. 4 (May 1970): 308.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. 312.

³⁰⁹ Crowe, “On the ‘Irrationality’ of Zen,” 32.

³¹⁰ Suzuki, “The Philosophy of Zen,” 5.

oneness and emptiness are essentially the same experiential reality.³¹¹ For Suzuki, *śūnyatā* must be inherently illogical, devoid of linguistic meaning, and pregnant with significance because experience is the central predicate of Zen.³¹²

An interesting point in Suzuki's thought mentioned above is his insistence that Zen, as properly experienced in *śūnyatā*, is essentially inter-connected, an "ātman, master of itself," and fully independent of subject-object relationships.³¹³ Furthermore, and of greater importance, is Suzuki's appeal to logically presenting *illogical* concepts when "reasoning defeats itself."³¹⁴ Rather, it seems as though Suzuki points to a higher reasoning, a logic-beyond-logic, where affirmations are informed only through experience, whereby oneness and brokenness are the same, where emptiness and fullness are implicitly identical.³¹⁵ Suzuki's use of a Zen passage describing unification in the experience of Zen enlightenment illustrates the greater point that within the context of overcoming logic, enlightenment is essentially "broken" and "full:"

When the mountains are seen as not standing against me, when they are dissolved into the oneness of things, they are not mountains, they cease to exist as objects of Nature. But when they are seen as standing against me, as separate from me...they are not mountains either. The mountains are really mountains when they are assimilated into my being and I am absorbed in them.³¹⁶

In Suzuki's thinking on *śūnyatā*, the plane of existence for the Zen practitioner no longer "find[s] anything frightening in infinite possibilities, unlimited freedom, never-ending responsibilities."³¹⁷ Even further, Suzuki is quick to point out that the experience of Zen means the recognition of things as they are and "contradictions resolve themselves without

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid. 6.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Suzuki tantalizes with the following reasoning: "When *śūnyatā* is really *śūnyatā* it becomes identical with *tathatā*." Ibid. 7.

³¹⁶ D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1956), 240.

³¹⁷ Suzuki, "The Philosophy of Zen," 8.

much ado.”³¹⁸ In a cryptic critique of the Mahāyāna tradition, Suzuki reasons, “It is not Zen’s way to annihilate the whole world or to reduce it to an abstract non-entity in order to experience the dissolution of contradictions.”³¹⁹

d. Liberation and Emptiness

To quickly sum up the relationship between liberation and emptiness, negative language plays a pivotal role from the emptiness of emptiness to the realization of non-substance in all things. Between the three examined traditions, there are differences in nuance, especially as experience is concerned; an overriding theme is, however, the need for liberation from the illusion of substance; this liberation is freedom from the suffering caused by thinking that things have independent substance. This is “accomplished” through the realization of emptiness in all things, including emptiness itself. The Buddhist teaching of liberation, especially in terms of negative language, is intrinsically related to the uniquely Buddhist teaching of the no-self. From this point, it may be said that negative language helps shape the language of liberation insofar as emptiness demonstrates non-substantiality of even emptiness. The missing element here is, however, the function of how something of essential no-substance, emptiness properly figured, can be expressed in language. It is important to delve into Nāgārjuna’s rejection of reification to further explore negative language in Buddhist emptiness.

2. Nāgārjuna’s Rejection of Reification: Negative Language Against Itself

a. Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way

The analysis of emptiness is here heavily influenced by the intricacies of Nāgārjuna’s thought because emptiness figures substantially in his explication of the Middle Way. An important development in Nāgārjuna’s thought is his rejection of reification. Reification, or

³¹⁸ Ibid. 10.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

the idea that things have independent substance, substantiates “thingness,” that constructs of reality are, in fact, “real.” To a thinker like Nāgārjuna, reification is an allusion because no-thing has independent substance; to make a phenomenon “real” – to give it thingness – is delusional because it does not “exist” independently. Thus, Nāgārjuna’s rejection of reification, or the non-reification of all things, is essentially no-thing-ness. It is a critique on reality assumed as such, as independently existing and caused; further, and more importantly, it is a critique on intrinsic substance. Nāgārjuna’s emptiness is primarily a rationalization of the non-reification of all phenomena.

Nāgārjuna’s rejection of reification is important to negative language and, more broadly, emptiness. In his major work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, one major analytical point is the rejection of both reification and nihilism. For Nāgārjuna, nihilism is absolute void or nothingness, while reification is the assigning of essence to a material object.³²⁰ Emptiness properly conceived of as lacking substance (of even itself), however, shows a middle path between nihilism and reification because it exposes both the lack of essence and the dependent origination of all things.³²¹ This is an issue of language between referents because nihilism and reification operate in terms of referential logic. As Williams helps clarify, “...while we may maintain that our referent is devoid of self-essence and cannot really be referred to, yet there is still a dependently-originated given which serves as a substratum to a verbal reference which in turn gives rise to the mistaken conception of a self-essence.”³²²

Empirically, emptiness is the method by which Nāgārjuna cuts away the delusion of the

³²⁰ See Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter XV, “Examination of Essence” in which he defines essence as follows: “Essence arising from / Causes and conditions makes no sense. / If essence came from causes and conditions, / Then it would be fabricated.” Ibid. 220. Additionally, Nāgārjuna makes the following distinction between essence as reification and nihilism: “If existence were through essence, / Then there would no nonexistence. / A change in essence / Could never be tenable.” Ibid. 223.

³²¹ Garfield interprets Nāgārjuna’s distinction in relation to the Buddha’s teaching: “In the *sutta*, the Buddha claims that reification derives from the failure to note impermanence and leads to grasping, craving, and the attendant suffering. Nihilism, he claims, is motivated by the failure to note the empirical reality of arising phenomena. It leads to suffering from failure to take life, others, and morality seriously enough.” Ibid. 223.

³²² Williams, “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madyamaka,” 8.

essence of things and the delusion of independent arising. Nāgārjuna's final rejection of both reification and nihilism is held in relation to an understanding of "essence" in space and time: "To say 'it is' is to grasp for permanence. / To say 'it is not' is to adopt the view of nihilism. / Therefore a wise person / Does not say 'exists' or 'does not exist.'"³²³ While Nāgārjuna's rejection of reification is certainly compelling, a further examination of his negative language is necessary to establish how this is vital to the Buddhist teaching of emptiness.

b. Non-reification and the Middle Way

Nāgārjuna's primary concern in the differentiation between nihilism and reification is what it means to say "essence," or where something has its own qualities. For Nāgārjuna, the affirmation of "essence" is called reification, whereby something exists independently in space and time. The conceptual opposite (the absolute negation of "essence"), or that nothing exists independently in space and time, is what he terms "nihilistic" because it means, at its very root, that nothing exists in either conventional or phenomenal reality. Nāgārjuna holds the meaning of reification in direct contrast of nihilism, and *vice versa*, for the rejection of "essence" in both a reificationist and nihilistic way. Nāgārjuna sees these two concepts as logically self-defeating because "'Whatever exists through its essence / Cannot be nonexistent' is eternalism. / 'It existed before but doesn't now' / Entails the error of nihilism."³²⁴

Nāgārjuna's argument for the rejection of reification pivots on the meaning of "essence." He argues that nothing has essence, or that nothing exists independently; for if something has essence it would mean that it has essential qualities, or attributes that compose a thing in time and space. Williams helps clarify this view: "To speak of the Madhyamaka view is to say that there *is* a correct way of things, and this is correctly expressed by such

³²³ Ibid. 40. Chapter XV: 8.

³²⁴ Ibid.

statements as ‘all entities lack inherent existence.’”³²⁵ Nāgārjuna argues that if there was an essence, this would delineate the qualities of permanence, stability, and independence.³²⁶

Nāgārjuna's rejection of reification does not conclude with the rejection of essential qualities that compose essences, but rather he shifts the focus to understanding the *consequence* of reification in relation to "suffering."³²⁷ It is here that Nāgārjuna applies a Buddhist understanding of "suffering" to the larger picture of what Garfield calls the "soteriological character of the text: Reification is the root of grasping and craving and hence of all suffering."³²⁸ The consequence of reification is the continuance of the cycle of delusion that things exist independently.

Furthermore, while Nāgārjuna deals with the views of nihilism and reification, he “pointed out the absurdity of believing that a real thing could appear and disappear at the same moment.”³²⁹ The logic of suffering as conditioned by the "truths" of existence holds conventional and phenomenal reality in paradox. It is in this paradox that Nāgārjuna teaches the middle way. Nāgārjuna's middle way, or the rejection of nihilistic and reificationist positions, shows the validity of liberation by holding the "truths" of reification and nihilism in paradox.³³⁰ His middle way is the teaching of emptiness, or that all things are ultimately empty of essence. Nāgārjuna applies this category to conventional and phenomenal truths because emptiness shows, in the most extreme way, even emptiness is empty itself. Williams helps unpack this logic when he explains, “Emptiness is therefore itself the very absence of

³²⁵ Williams, “On the Interpretation of Madhymaka Thought,” 200. Italics original.

³²⁶ Ibid. 72. Chapter XXIV: 38. “If there is essence, the whole world / Will be unarising, unceasing, / And static. The entire phenomenal world / Would be immutable.”

³²⁷ Nāgārjuna most succinctly rejects reification at the end of chapter XXIV: “If it (the world) were not empty, / Then action would be without profit. / The act of ending suffering and / Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist.” Ibid. 72. Chapter XXIV:39.

³²⁸ Ibid. 314. Garfield commentary.

³²⁹ Troy Wilson Organ, “Reason and Experience in Mahayana Buddhism,” *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 20, no. 2 (April, 1952): 79.

³³⁰ Nāgārjuna posits the reificationist view: “If something comes from its own essence, / Its cessation would not exist. / So if an essence is posited, / One denies cessation.” He continues directly afterward with the nihilist position: “If suffering had an essence, / Its cessation would not exist. / So if an essence is posited, / One denies cessation.” Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Chapter XXIV: 22 and 23, respectively.

inherent existence of entities, and is not the entities seen dependently originated and empty.”³³¹

Though this examination of negative language attempts to flesh out Nāgārjuna’s concept of the Middle Way, it is necessary to discuss how dependent causation contributes to the negations used. Nāgārjuna’s use of dependent origination is central in how emptiness works in negative language. It is important to step back for a moment, though, and examine how earlier teachings of dependent origination inform his use of language and then fill it out with a student who was inspired by Nāgārjuna’s thought. The purpose of this is to come to a better understanding of how non-reification and dependent causation form the negative language of emptiness.

c. Non-reification and Dependent Causation

The Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is thoroughly intertwined with other teachings: “[the Buddha] explained how suffering arises from causes, and argued that by destroying the cause of suffering, suffering would cease.”³³² This corresponds to emptiness because it exposes how reified things are empty of substance because they are caused, hence the importance of Nāgārjuna’s teaching that “...elaborated on the Buddha’s claim that everything is empty of self because everything arises in dependence on something else; nothing can be independent because everything is dependent.”³³³ However, as Lopez rightly observes, this operates within the matrix of karmic consequence so the further nuance here is “...the fact of dependent origination means that emptiness is not the utter absence of existence, but rather the absence of a specific kind of falsely imagined existence.”³³⁴ It is important to trace this back further, prior to Nāgārjuna because the teaching is so thoroughly intertwined in Buddhist thought; the questions of dependent

³³¹ Williams, “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought,” 205.

³³² Lopez, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 213. Italics removed.

³³³ Ibid. Italics removed.

³³⁴ Ibid. Italics removed.

origination are foundational to further questions of existence, emptiness, and liberation from suffering.

In the *Cūlasunnata Sutta*, the Buddha confides the state of *śūnyatā* to his disciple, Ānanda: "Now, Ānanda, I often abide in voidness...[a bhikkhu] enters into that perception of the base of infinite space and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision."³³⁵ The control of single-minded concentration is understood by the Buddha to mean that the "[bhikkhu] regards [the field of perception] as void of what is not there, but as to what remains there he understands that which is present thus: 'This is present.'"³³⁶ This early Theravādan text on *śūnyatā* brings out the questions of how existence are related to emptiness. John Cobb, Jr. calls the early Buddhist teaching on emptiness a "... the realization of oneself as an instance of dependent co-origination or the concrescence of all things."³³⁷ The connection between emptiness and empty-mindedness in the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* is made through simultaneous affirmation and negation:

[the bhikkhu] attends to the singleness dependent on the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. His mind enters into that perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision.³³⁸

The dialectic of affirmation and negation within the complexity of emptiness allows the Buddha to communicate the experiential, even existential, nature, or lack-of-nature of emptiness. This is no simple dialectic. Rather, it is more articulately a dichotomous dialectic because there is a dual articulation and negation. The "perception of the base" is simultaneously "neither" and "nor" perception and non-perception. This dichotomous dialectic at once affirms the necessity of perception and non-perception. However, the dialectic in this logic is the conclusion that something is paradoxically gained, that the mind

³³⁵ *Middle Length Discourses*, 965-966.

³³⁶ *Ibid.* 967.

³³⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr. "Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 45, no. 1 (March 1977): 11.

³³⁸ *Middle Length Discourses*, 968.

"acquires" a certain centeredness thus allowing the experience of emptiness. It is through the affirmation of the *acquisition* of emptiness that the negation of perception is possible. This view, however, tends to focus on a type of experience of emptiness (as perception, etc.) in *relation* to dependent causation rather than as the emptiness of all things *because* they are dependently caused.

Later constructs of dependent causation, undertaken by a Tibetan monk, Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), who was influenced by Nāgārjuna, focus on the centrality of dependent causation because it "...means that emptiness is not the utter absence of existence, but rather the absence of a specific kind of falsely imagined existence."³³⁹ Tsong kha pa focuses his devotion to the Buddha on dependent causation because "When you [the Buddha] saw that emptiness is the meaning of dependent origination, then [you saw] that the emptiness of intrinsic nature and the efficacy of actions are not contradictory."³⁴⁰ Tsong kha pa goes on to counterbalance this with another teaching: "Therefore, you said that apart from things that arise dependently, nothing exists. Thus, apart from things that are intrinsically empty, nothing exists."³⁴¹ For him, the paradox rests not with emptiness, because emptiness is not a thing, but with causation; indeed, the path to enlightenment is where one sees clearly causation and thus, that all things are empty of "intrinsic nature."³⁴² Tsong kha pa traces the central teaching of dependent origination back to the Buddha, as "...the path of dependent origination is the very essence of your teaching..."³⁴³ The centrality of dependent causation is important here because it exposes, aside from any experience of emptiness, the logical fallacy with things having independent existence: Tsong kha pa shows that if Buddhism is the Middle Path (in much the same way as his teacher, Nāgārjuna) between reification and

³³⁹ Lopez, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 213. Italics removed.

³⁴⁰ Tsong kha pa, "Rten 'brel bstod pa [shortened title]," trans. Donald Lopez, in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 214.

³⁴¹ Ibid. 215.

³⁴² Ibid. 214.

³⁴³ Ibid.

nihilism, causation and (non)causation, dependent origination and independent causation, then emptiness must inform all perceptions of (non)substance, showing that all things are dependently caused. For him, the path to understanding, to enlightenment, is understanding how all things are empty and dependently caused – and then being able to “see” that: “Understanding that all of this is naturally empty and understanding that this effect arises from that are mutually supportive, without impeding each other.”³⁴⁴

d. Reified Negation

The language used by Nāgārjuna, Tsong kha pa, and others shows how all things are empty of independent substance. Nāgārjuna, especially, deals with the question of dependent essence in terms of negative language, purposely set against itself. If things are dependently caused by some-thing else, then they must be empty of intrinsic substance, so they do not “exist” by themselves. Nāgārjuna resolves the problem of reified negation in his language by the logic of the tetralamma; he does not take a position on emptiness, yet shows how all things are empty. Williams lucidly expands on how Nāgārjuna resolves the problem of reified negation:

That emptiness itself is empty of inherent existence in the Madhyamaka is now well known, and was an important point stressed again and again by Tsong kha pa. Thus emptiness is also a conceptual entity (*prajñaptisat*) existing in dependence. It does not follow from all of this, however, that emptiness does not exist in the way that anything can exist, as a conventionally existent phenomenon...In terms of existence, emptiness has as much real existence as anything else.³⁴⁵

Negative language is here used to cut through delusion, to expand on this is a falsity for whatever reality might be on the path to enlightenment. However, Nāgārjuna and his later disciple do not simply rely on negative language to cut through the brush of delusion; they also use it to cut away any misapprehensions of truth or falsity. This view, that emptiness is

³⁴⁴ Ibid. 215.

³⁴⁵ Williams, “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought,” 207. Italics original.

itself is empty deals squarely with the logical problem of reified negation, though further discussion of non-duality is needed to further contextualize this. A discussion of non-duality will help expand the analysis of negative language in Buddhism because it follows from how reified negation is used as a logical syllogism.

3. Non-Duality and Emptiness

a. A Zen Critique

The criticism that Nāgārjuna is reaching for something beyond emptiness is put forth by the Zen thinker, D.T. Suzuki:

[T]he Mahāyānists do not regard negation as the ultimate goal of their speculations; for with them negation is but a road to reach a higher form of affirmation, and they are aware of the fact that the human mind lives in affirmation, and not in negation.³⁴⁶

It must be questioned if Suzuki understood the internal logic of the Mahāyāna position on emptiness. For Suzuki, the more influential idea in Mahāyāna thought is the use of negation to overcome the "limitations of the human mind" in order to assert a higher truth.³⁴⁷

Furthermore, the highest expression of logic in Suzuki's appropriation of Mahāyāna "cannot be represented by any other means than negation."³⁴⁸ The intentional use of negation is directly related to what Suzuki calls "intuition" because it surpasses conventional thinking into what he calls "mysticism."³⁴⁹ It is this point of departure that Suzuki uses for what would become a Zen reform: he says that the Mahāyāna teaching of surpassing through negation ventures into "speculative mysticism."³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ D.T. Suzuki, "The Development of Mahāyāna Buddhism" in *The Awakening of Zen*, ed. by Christmas Humphreys (Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1980), 5.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 6-7.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. 7.

Though Suzuki stresses that particular schools of Buddhist thought are environmentally formed and socially conditioned,³⁵¹ he draws particular attention to the dialectic of Mahāyāna that eventually leads to Zen reforms. For Suzuki, the emphasis on negation in Mahāyāna thought only concludes in further negating other negations. His analysis of Mahāyāna thought focuses on the attempt to express an affirmation with logical negations. Zen, he claims, pushes this analysis further and attempts to work out of the negations into true affirmations.³⁵²

The larger criticism here pertains to duality, as Nāgārjuna works through the logic of the emptiness of emptiness; however, as Suzuki argues, Nāgārjuna instead works into another duality. His criticism of Nāgārjuna seems to echo the much older Theravādan idea that emptiness eventually exposes an “undifferentiated” realm; Kenneth Inada presents what may be a summation of *śūnyatā* in Theravada thought: “*Śūnyatā* is what makes the two realms [*samsāra* and *nibbāna*] coexistent, not side-by-side, but as two sides of the same reality. Thus relational-origination spans the *samsāric* and *nibbānic* realms, because it is in essence a voidal, undifferentiated process.”³⁵³ Suzuki wants to push this further because emptiness, for him, exposes the non-duality of (non)existence; thus, in his view, the logic of the earlier Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools is flawed. The tension, indeed the very difference of emptiness here, rests in the claims to the original teachings of the Buddha.

Nancy Wilson Ross affirms that the early "First Principle" of the Buddha is ultimately "positive" because the void is "that fullness without boundaries from which all life emerges."³⁵⁴ While emptiness is portrayed as positive experientially, the textual negations

³⁵¹ Ibid. 13.

³⁵² For a brief discussion of this idea, see *ibid.* 8.

³⁵³ Inada, “Time and Temporality,” 177.

³⁵⁴ Ross, *Buddhism*, 146. Ross goes further to say that *śūnyatā* is a non-dualistic teaching. However, the argument of affirmation/negation holds that dual tensions are present simultaneously. While it may be argued that the result of such logic means that *śūnyatā* is thus nondualistic, the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* shows an internal tension whose result is paradoxical. In this logic, the teaching of *śūnyatā* remains paradoxical because it is

create an internal dualistic tension. This tension is necessary to describe liberation without affirmative descriptors. Thus, liberation, as understood by the Buddha, is supremely and paradoxically, emptiness: The negation of liberation is the affirmation of that which ensnares worldly existence, or "being" properly understood.

b. The Language of Non-Duality

In response to these existential questions of liberation through emptiness, Nāgārjuna demonstrates the power of the logic of negation in his view of emptiness. Malcolm Eckel comments that the emptiness of emptiness consequently means, "none of the normal distinctions between things applies. Emptiness itself is a distinct position, too, and when it is analyzed from the point of view of Emptiness, it also has to be empty."³⁵⁵ From the point of view that emptiness is itself empty of substance, Nāgārjuna's "position" might be seen as thoroughly non-dual. Garfield calls this:

a critical three-way relation between emptiness, dependent origination and verbal convention, and [Nāgārjuna] asserts that this relation itself is the Middle Way toward which his entire philosophical system is aimed.³⁵⁶

Nāgārjuna sees how the emptiness of emptiness is predicated on non-duality because the Middle Way is that which is of non-substantial "being." However, this is the same point of contention that D.T. Suzuki argues: Nāgārjuna's attempt at a non-dual understanding of emptiness "creates" another thingness with which emptiness is posited. Suzuki sees Zen's response as a means to go beyond this position.

Within the larger problem of addressing proper textual context,³⁵⁷ a major focus in the corpus of Zen literature seems to point to the rejection of duality. Robert Powell describes

simultaneously affirming and negating existence and non-existence. Masao Abe affirms this point: "True *Śūnyatā*, being the negation of sheer emptiness as well as sheer fullness, is an active and creative emptiness which, just because of being itself empty, lets everything and everyone be and work respectively in their particularity." Masao Abe, "Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 1, no. 1, (September 1965): 119.

³⁵⁵ Eckel, *To See the Buddha*, 43. Capitalization of "Emptiness" is original.

³⁵⁶ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 304 (Garfield commentary).

the teaching of Zen's "non-duality...[as] essential to an understanding of the Zen way."³⁵⁸ The centrality of non-duality is grounded in the earlier Mahāyāna teaching that "all objects and phenomena are unreal in the sense that they are indeterminate."³⁵⁹ Where Zen departs from this earlier Mahāyāna is in the rejection of the self. In Powell's understanding of Zen, the duality of the self, as the one who experiences emptiness, is negated in the "realization of this emptiness of the phenomenal world, of multiplicity, and of the self."³⁶⁰ He goes further to describe the "Reality" that is distinct of earlier Mahāyāna thought, yet is the logical consequence of the teaching of non-duality.³⁶¹ In other places of the Zen tradition, non-duality is better described as "transcendent;" it is the transcendent which seems to clarify the distinction between "understanding" and "realization."³⁶² Furthermore, non-duality implies the rejection of "logic and reason" insofar as they imply dualistic considerations: "Logic and reason are impure for the simple reason that they lead to reflection and doubt, not only about affairs that we do not usually doubt, but also about affairs that we cannot tolerate doubt about."³⁶³ The implications of a rejection of duality mean a singleness of mind, transcendent meditative stillness, where the practitioner releases the dualistic tendencies of "logic and reason." As a consequence of this rejection of dualism, though, is an "absence of a theory of

³⁵⁷ Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47-48. "...[I]f a Zen text can only be understood against the background of its Zen 'context,' the same would be true of its context as well. As an object of study, 'context' also has a context which requires complex interpretation."

³⁵⁸ Robert Powell, *Zen and Reality: An Approach to Sanity and Happiness on a Non-Sectarian Basis* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), 88.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. 89.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. 90.

³⁶¹ "[T]hat one reality which appears as 'me' is part of the great stream of Life that not only encompasses organic life but also the inanimate world – that stream, which because it is ever in a flux, represents transience itself." Ibid. 91.

³⁶² Chen-Chi Chang, "The Nature of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 6, no. 4 (January 1957), 335.

³⁶³ Dale Riepe, "The Significance of the Attack upon Rationality by Zen Buddhism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 26, no. 3 (March 1966): 434-435.

causality.”³⁶⁴ What is transcendent is non-caused in the sense that non-dualism means that what “is” simply “is.”

Winston King examines the issue of non-duality in temporal terms when he argues,

Zen seeks to keep both the transcendent and the immanent, the absolute and the conditioned, the universal and the particular, the temporal moment and the eternal Unity together in one integral consciousness that locates itself in our existential present.³⁶⁵

This temporal argument seems to bring together paradoxical metaphysics in a way that affirms a “Unity.” Rather this ambiguous acceptance/rejection of dualism is indicative of the paradox that finds a middle ground distinct from earlier Mahāyāna teachings that seem to push beyond emptiness into another (some/no)thing. King elaborates: “The reality of neither side in any of these dichotomies is to be sacrificed to the other, or even subordinated to it.”³⁶⁶

This argument shows that while Zen may use the teaching of emptiness to reach higher truths, it also rejects an ultimate affirmation of truth because it is logically inconsistent with holding the aforementioned temporally-conditioned aspects in paradox. As T.P. Kasulis reasons, a new duality arises when paradoxical dualities are eliminated because “nothingness is a universal solvent. Not only does it dissolve any conceptualization try to grasp it, but, even more radically, it dissolves itself.”³⁶⁷

Merv Fowler shifts the emphasis on emptiness as the catalyst by which to reject dualism insofar as he examines the Mahāyāna position of emptiness: “it is much more the idea that ultimate reality is something that cannot exist in finite things or in ideas, even the idea of emptiness itself.”³⁶⁸ Rather, for Fowler, the connection between Mahāyāna and Zen

³⁶⁴ Ibid. 436.

³⁶⁵ Winston L. King, “Time Transcendence-Acceptance in Zen Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 36, no. 3 (September 1968): 223.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ T.P. Kasulis, *Zen Action / Zen Person* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 41.

³⁶⁸ Merv Fowler, *Zen Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 73.

understandings of non-duality are inherently similar, or that finding meaning “between dualities” means finding truth without “finite definitions.”³⁶⁹

c. Emptiness and Non-Duality

The Mahāyāna position on emptiness plays especial importance with the language of non-duality. Ruegg helps unpack the logic here:

If *śūnyatā* had the quality of being an existent (*bhāvatva: yod pa*), there would be no absolute absence (*atyantābhāva*) of duality (*dvayabhāva*), no being the real nature (*dharmatā*) of *abhūtaparikalpa*; and so it has been stated that it is not existent...As for its not being non-existent either, non-ens of duality does not consist of *abhāva* having the form of *abhāva* of duality (*dvayabhāva*). Were it such *abhāva* pure and simple, there would be existence of duality; and there would be no *dharmatā* of *abhūtaparikalpa* – like the impermanence and painfulness (of what is impermanent and painful).³⁷⁰

Ruegg demonstrates the power of negation in the logic of non-duality in the Mahāyāna position by outlining the relationship between existents and what that means in terms of duality. Further clarification is given by Paul Williams when he argues in terms of analogy when he seeks to outline the full force of negation:

The opposition *prapañca::śūnyatā* is closely reflected in Madhyamaka texts with the identification of *niṣprapañca* and *nirvāṇa*; such is interesting in the context of the Madhyamaka identification of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* for it shows just one aspect of the creation of a new meaning-giving opposition concomitant with the breakdown of this old antithesis.

Williams’ clarification shows how the relational logic operates within a position maintained by emptiness. This is important to understand the Mahāyāna position of emptiness in terms of non-duality because it operates within the structures of internal tension; this is of importance to teasing out negative language.

The Zen criticism of Nāgārjuna’s position pushes the framework of non-duality even further by stating that the Middle Way is “between dualities.” This additionally begs the

³⁶⁹ Ibid. Fowler goes as far as to point to debate concerning the identification of emptiness with a “metaphysical ultimate reality.” Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ruegg, “The Uses of the Four Positions of the ‘Catus-koti’ and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahayana Buddhism,” 28. Italics original.

question of what it means to “exist” in between binary oppositions, between thingness and emptiness, between affirmation and negation. Thus, the negative language of non-duality pushes this question further because thingness is negated to the point of where even the negation is no longer expressible: is this the starting point of enlightenment? Is enlightenment an experience of negations, of stripping away dualities, of finding that Middle Way in between binary oppositions? An examination of Buddhist enlightenment is necessary to follow the logic of negative language as it applies to emptiness.

4. Emptiness and Enlightenment

a. A Definition of the Indefinable

Perhaps the entirety of language that informs emptiness might be summed up in terms of Buddhist enlightenment: falling away, non-substantiality, complete otherness. Nevertheless, the idea of describing enlightenment is logically untenable as “[t]he state of enlightenment is often said to be beyond the conception of the unenlightened, and hence beyond expression in language. Yet there have been numerous attempts across the Buddhist world to describe enlightenment in words.”³⁷¹ The language of emptiness shares many parallels with that of enlightenment; indeed, negative language plays an especial part in both teachings. What is described here is the function of that negative language of emptiness in terms of enlightenment.

An early connection in the language of emptiness in enlightenment occurs in the internal logic of a simultaneous affirmation-negation. The Theravādan *Cūlasunnata Sutta* goes on to affirm that *śūnyatā* is, properly understood, liberation from the illusion of earthly matters. The internal logic uses simultaneous affirmation-negation to show that existential cessation is possible only through liberation:

³⁷¹ Lopez, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 488. Italics removed.

When [the *bhikkhu*] knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: "It is liberated." He understands: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."³⁷²

This "liberation" is what the Buddha calls the "abid[ing] in pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness."³⁷³ Though the Buddha's teaching on the attainment of emptiness is seemingly affirmative,³⁷⁴ the operative logic uses negativity to create a narrative tension. Hence, the function of language here is a dialectical positive and negative approach to emptiness.

For Nāgārjuna, the position of emptiness expresses enlightenment because the causal relationship between empty existents lends further examination into what "is" emptiness. As Jay Garfield shows, Nāgārjuna connects the idea, "there is no difference in entity between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*; *nirvāṇa* is simply *saṃsāra* seen without reification, without attachment, without delusion."³⁷⁵ Nāgārjuna's emptiness culminates in an appropriation of the Buddhist teaching of enlightenment, or *nirvāṇa*. The subtle distinction that Nāgārjuna makes from the earlier Theravādan texts is in his definition of *nirvāṇa*: that cessation is the liberation from the delusion of *saṃsāra*. Nāgārjuna goes as far as to equate *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* because "Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*, / That is the limit of cyclic existence. / There is not even the slightest difference between them, / Or even the subtlest thing."³⁷⁶ The paradox in Nāgārjuna's emptiness is the language of equality. Garfield brings this out: "... *nirvāṇa* is related to *saṃsāra* as a state of awareness of things as they are as opposed to a state of awareness of things as they appear to be."³⁷⁷ Within the logic of this equation, however, is the

³⁷² *Middle Length Discourses*, 969.

³⁷³ *Ibid.* 970.

³⁷⁴ The Buddha's teaching of the attainment of voidness in the *Cūlasunnata Sutta* uses descriptive terms like "acquire" to show how single-mindedness is possible through certain mental and/or behavior modifications. Within the text's internal logic, the description of something "acquired" is herein described as affirmative. What is "gained" by the teaching, such as voidness or liberation, is herein described as negative because the texts use negations like "destroyed" and "no more."

³⁷⁵ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 331 (Garfield commentary).

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 331, 75, Chapter XXV: 20.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 322. Garfield's commentary.

key idea of how paradoxical emptiness figures into the doctrine of *nirvāṇa*. The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth operates with the same logic as dependent origination in that all things arise, abide, and cease. The circular path of these logical arguments is driven by the delusion of the cycle of existence. It is in the face of emptiness that the delusion of this cycle is overcome. As Williams cogently argues, "...there was a strong tendency in the Madhyamaka to treat all causal relationships as coherent empirically only in terms of mutual dependence and as collapsing ultimately into their incoherence and emptiness."³⁷⁸ This "collapsing ultimately into their incoherence and emptiness" is why Nāgārjuna goes as far as to equate *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* because through emptiness one is freed from the delusion of cyclical existence as well as the delusion of bondage to existence.³⁷⁹ In Kalupahana's treatment appropriation, he draws a distinction in Nāgārjuna's understanding of "concepts" and "real nature." He goes further to justify Nāgārjuna's equation because "there is no difference whatsoever between the phenomenal (*saṃsāra*) and the transcendental (*nirvāṇa*), for the reality of *saṃsāra* or the world is identical with the absolute."³⁸⁰

This explanation, however, does not address Nāgārjuna's internal logic. Indeed, the language of negativity must be pressed further because for Nāgārjuna, liberation is cessation. Liberation entails the realization of the emptiness of *saṃsāra*; thus, Nāgārjuna describes *nirvāṇa* as "unrelinquished, unattained, / unannihilated, not permanent, / unarisen, unceased..."³⁸¹ However, Nāgārjuna is careful to avoid the error of reifying *nirvāṇa* because it

³⁷⁸ Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," 13.

³⁷⁹ Nāgārjuna's analysis of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is in reference to dependent origination. This reference allows him to use earlier (Chapter VII) comparisons of "compounded things" and "uncompounded things" in relation to liberation from delusion and bondage: "Since arising, ceasing, and abiding / Are not established, there are no compounded things. / If all compounded things are unestablished, / How could the uncompounded be established?" Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 22. Chapter VII: 33. (Garfield commentary).

³⁸⁰ Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, 135.

³⁸¹ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 73. Chapter XXV: 3.

is through emptiness that the delusion of *saṃsāra* is exposed.³⁸² However, as Kalupahana reasons, "...Ultimate Reality cannot be communicated without resorting to the conventional, and that without understanding the Ultimate Reality one cannot realize *nirvāṇa*."³⁸³ Cyclic existence is at once empty and non-reified insofar as it is the realization of cessation; as Garfield explains, "[*nirvāṇa*] is, by definition, liberation from all that characterizes *saṃsāra*."³⁸⁴ It is liberation from *saṃsāra*, according to Nāgārjuna, that allows one to understand *nirvāṇa* as "neither existent nor nonexistent."³⁸⁵

Though Nāgārjuna's view of liberation, and indeed of enlightenment, is thoroughly nuanced, there is a tension still at play in the internal logic. Williams draws out this tension explicitly: "Such reflects a certain tension between the transcendence of the cause of *saṃsāra* and the universality of emptiness, but such a tension is only possible at the level of *saṃvṛtisatya*, where the primacy must in fact be given to mind."³⁸⁶ It is important to note Nāgārjuna's powerful influence on later Zen teachings of enlightenment. As Heinrich Dumoulin argues:

The chief elements in the doctrine of Transcendental Wisdom – negativism, paradox, religious experience in intuitive cognition, the comprehension of things in their thusness – all flowed from the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* through Nāgārjuna into Zen, embedding themselves deeply in its substance.³⁸⁷

Similarly, Fowler reflects on the general goal of *nirvana* in early Mahāyāna; he connects the idea of *nirvāṇa* with emptiness because there is a "total lack of plurality and dualities in all things" as well as a "commonality in emptiness."³⁸⁸ For Fowler, the emptiness shows a natural progression of logic within a changing Mahāyāna, for the experiential focus of Zen

³⁸² Nāgārjuna avoids the reification of *nirvāṇa* by denying its conventional existence: " *Nirvāṇa* is not existent. / It would then have the characteristics of age and death. / There is no existent entity / Without age and death." Ibid. 73. Chapter XXV: 4.

³⁸³ Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, 137.

³⁸⁴ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 326. Garfield commentary.

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 74. Chapter XXV: 10.

³⁸⁶ Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," 27.

³⁸⁷ Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., *A History of Zen Buddhism*, trans. Paul Peachey (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), 36-37.

³⁸⁸ Fowler, *Zen Buddhism*, 69.

acknowledges that “it...takes a long time to remove the dualistic, selfish, and deeply rooted habitual thoughts arising from passions.”³⁸⁹

b. Zen Enlightenment

Zen enlightenment is found in the act of “beholding, unfolding, or realizing the mind-essence in its fullness” because much emphasis is placed upon the flash of sudden “awakening.” Indeed, scholars point to the necessity of Zen-knowledge of the practitioner, not the philosopher, because “Zen is something round and rolling, slippery and slick – ungraspable and indescribable.”³⁹⁰ This is not a definitive description, however, because other scholars argue that a careful examination of the negative language yields particular understandings that are completely within a historically-grounded comprehension of Zen truths. Whether the experience of Zen demands the refusal of “conceptualization” or is confined to a historical appropriation, the centrality of the language expressing Zen enlightenment is important to the tradition. For even if many refuse to describe Zen enlightenment, it is important “to remember that no school of Buddhism has produced more texts than Zen!”³⁹¹ Furthermore, the central importance of language in Zen thought tends to deal with the general issue of existence, for as Rokusaburō Nieda suggests, “Language is the place in which existence dwells.”³⁹²

Dale S. Wright explores the meaning behind language in the Zen tradition through the use of modern philosophical method. His analysis is on the supposed “transcendence” of language in Zen, even though many of the texts seek to “articulate what ‘enlightenment is.’”³⁹³ Wright argues (albeit implicitly) along the same lines as Suzuki regarding the final limitations of languages, but goes further than Suzuki when he clarifies the point: “language

³⁸⁹ Chang, “The Nature of Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism,” 340.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 355.

³⁹¹ Fowler, *Zen Buddhism*, 71.

³⁹² Nieda, “‘Nothing’ in Zen,” 38.

³⁹³ Dale S. Wright, “Rethinking Transcendence: The Roll of Language in Zen Experience,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 42, no. 1 (January 1992): 113.

is taken as an interpolation between the knowing subject and objective reality which inevitably causes distortion.”³⁹⁴ However, Wright again asserts the limitation of language in that “mediation” is simply not possible when discussing subject-object relationships in Zen thought.³⁹⁵ Wright goes on to examine the subject-object relationship of Zen thinking in the context of deconstruction with the thesis, “Language, and its entire history of involvement in thought and practice, functions to set up a context of significance within which perception occurs.”³⁹⁶ For Wright, the “context of significance” allows him to connect the idea of Zen as seeing things as they really are with an appropriate linguistic articulation because the meaning of subjects and objects seemingly dissolve in Zen enlightenment.³⁹⁷ The “context of significance” paradoxically details the language of enlightenment.³⁹⁸ Even further, Wright shows that early Zen texts contain many passages on the exact nature of enlightenment, but many later texts resort to the argument that enlightenment is ultimately “ungraspable.”³⁹⁹ Wright draws the connection in the development of Zen teaching of enlightenment with the changing attitudes toward a “context of significance.”⁴⁰⁰ He even goes as far as to show that the development of differing articulations of enlightenment were “full” of language, “as the focal point of its evocation and emergence.”⁴⁰¹

Within the context of Zen enlightenment, Wright emphasizes the necessity of a “reorientation of language [that] would require training to a level of fluency in distinctive, nonobjectifying, rhetorical practices.”⁴⁰² The “reorientation,” even reinvention of language,

³⁹⁴ Ibid. 114.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid. 121.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 122.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. 123.

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 126.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. 127. Wright continues with a cogent analysis: “...awakening would consist, among other things, in an awakening *to* rather than *from* language. Focus on this dimension of ‘awakening’ would help make sense of the ever-present connection made in classical Zen texts between ‘radical rhetoric’ and ‘awakened vision.’” Ibid.

133. Italics original.

⁴⁰² Ibid. 133.

is necessary to capture what is “both actively manifest and presupposed in the constitution of this experience.”⁴⁰³ Kasulis goes even further to argue, “words (and the concepts based on them) are ultimately *empty* and to be mistrusted as a medium for fully understanding the nature of experience (or of reality).”⁴⁰⁴ While Zen enlightenment is thoroughly documented as something that must be experienced,⁴⁰⁵ descriptions of the experience vary from “sudden” to “overpowering” to “breakthrough experience.”⁴⁰⁶ Additionally, Wright highlights the impact of this uncontrollable experience in relation to language: most lucidly, the Zen awakening is the “experience of the ‘void’ at the heart of things, as emptiness, openness, groundlessness.”⁴⁰⁷ He draws attention to the paradox that while the experience of Zen enlightenment is, by definition, not relational in linguistic terms, it is the emptiness, the void, of the experience which *gives* Zen its language. Dumoulin offers a cogent interpretation of the relationship between enlightenment and language: “The negations are the indispensable prerequisite for a breakthrough to the affirmation which arises in the comprehension of thusness.”⁴⁰⁸ In other words, the emptiness of Zen enlightenment is the thoroughgoing experience that *allows* the awakened to talk about things as they really are.

Though much of the aforementioned literature and analysis describe Zen in ways that seem esoteric, distant, and even atemporal, it is important to view the negative language of emptiness in terms of time and space. Winston L. King carefully argues that Zen practice is thoroughly grounded in the temporal, in the here-and-now. He traces this temporal perspective back through early Hindu thought because the Zen practitioner “crav[es] for a present experience of an absolutely time-transcending awareness, which is the earnest of

⁴⁰³ Ibid. 134.

⁴⁰⁴ Kasulis, *Zen Action / Zen Person*, 12. Italics original.

⁴⁰⁵ For a short discussion of this, see Wright, “Rethinking Transcendence,” 133ff.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid. 134. Winston L. King makes a careful distinction in his analysis of what sudden enlightenment means: “With regard to Zen satori, we may note that it appears more sudden only by virtue of emptiness upon the final moment itself, for in Zen, too, are present both preparation for and consequent development of satori.” King, “A Comparison of Theravada and Zen Buddhist Meditational Methods and Goals,” 310.

⁴⁰⁷ Wright, “Rethinking Transcendence,” 133.

⁴⁰⁸ Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, 38.

man's true and ultimate condition."⁴⁰⁹ However, King goes further to clarify that within the context of its own tradition, Zen teaches that this experience, the practitioner "seeks a pure non-temporal experience *within* the temporal itself, not apart from it."⁴¹⁰ Dialectically, King points to the internal logic of atemporality in the Zen tradition: temporality is redefined as atemporality because sheer cyclical time creates an "Absolute," which is, by definition, rejected.⁴¹¹ What holds the Zen doctrines of emptiness and enlightenment in the context of temporality is the teaching that the experience of both emptiness and enlightenment are located in the present time, the here-and-now:

...Zen seeks to keep both the transcendent and the immanent, the absolute and the conditioned, the universal and the particular, the temporal moment and the eternal Unity together in one integral consciousness that locates itself in our existential present.⁴¹²

Furthermore, Zen teaches that the "ordinariness" in time and space is what not only brings out, but constitutes, *satori* (understanding).⁴¹³ This "ordinariness" of life may be connected with the teaching of dependent origination: "the uniqueness of experiential events does not lie in the separable and independent nature but rather lies in the truly dynamically dependent nature of things."⁴¹⁴ King goes even further to negate the importance of time, within the context of time itself, because "Zen time-transcendence [is]...the existential realization of time's irrelevance, ever and always."⁴¹⁵ However, King draws a careful distinction in this negation, because it is applicable to temporality itself, not the further implication of full enlightenment: "a *satori*-awareness that lives fully in the present has the best of both past and future values."⁴¹⁶ Zen enlightenment is grounded in current time; transcendence occurs

⁴⁰⁹ King, "Time Transcendence-Acceptance in Zen Buddhism," 219.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. Italics original.

⁴¹¹ King later reverts back to the aforementioned connection with Hinduism and concludes the Zen tradition breaks with a Hindu understanding of temporality because it rejects the cyclical view of time. Ibid. 221.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Inada, "Time and Temporality," 175.

⁴¹⁵ King, "Time Transcendence-Acceptance in Zen Buddhism," 223.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. 224. Italics original.

through time: "...[T]his is one of the major marks of Zen 'orthodoxy': the experience must come suddenly or it is not Zen."⁴¹⁷ King elsewhere calls *satori* "truth received in its instantaneous wholeness."⁴¹⁸ Further, within the context of Zen enlightenment, emptiness shows "a crucial difference between the Zen Buddhist's experience and an outside observer's characterization of it."⁴¹⁹ Though the present tense describes Zen enlightenment in its temporal context, it does not adequately affirm the "distinctive breakthrough experience."⁴²⁰ King elaborates on the implication of the "mystical" enlightenment experience that is both atemporal and empty.⁴²¹ This experience is at once empty insofar as it is "mystical" and yet completely "breakthrough" because it does not accept the "false duality in its contrast to 'ordinary' experience."⁴²² King highlights this paradox when he follows Keiji Nishitani in an attempt to reconcile the aforementioned tension between the temporality of the here-and-now and the atemporality of the "distinctive breakthrough experience." Nishitani elaborates on the enlightenment experience as the awareness of emptiness in relation to death because "when a man dies to his former-ordinary state of awareness, thus ceasing to live in the present as opposed to past and future...he passes to an entirely different level of being."⁴²³

What makes a Zen understanding of time paradoxical in relation to enlightenment and emptiness is the tension between temporality and atemporality. In one respect, enlightenment happens instantly, at once within time and yet, by definition, outside of time. But the true tension here is in the proper understanding of emptiness as it applies to this context. It is emptiness that shows how Zen enlightenment can be simultaneously temporal and atemporal because, as King shows, the "mystical" element transcends normal boundaries of time.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 225.

⁴¹⁸ King, "A Comparison of Theravada and Zen Buddhist Meditational Methods and Goals," 304.

⁴¹⁹ Kasulis, *Zen Action / Zen Person*, 130.

⁴²⁰ King, "Time Transcendence-Acceptance in Zen Buddhism," 226.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid. 228. .

Emptiness is the catalyst by which elements of temporality and atemporality affirm the Zen experience of enlightenment through the absolute negation of contextualization *and* simultaneous affirmation of a temporally-conditioned experience outside of absolute time; this reveals the internal logic that King uses to assert that the atemporal enlightenment experience *within* temporality.

c. Emptiness and Enlightenment

To quickly sum, negative language plays an important role in describing enlightenment, namely because any real enlightenment is indescribable. Negative language allows for a description whereby things fall away, one's conditioned existence is seen, and liberation is realized. The Zen tradition launches particularly apt criticisms against earlier traditions; Zen enlightenment differs from earlier descriptions primarily in terms of (a)temporality. While enlightenment in earlier traditions is described as realizing non-substantiality, seeing the emptiness in all things, Zen descriptions are much more time-conditioned, as something that occurs suddenly and fleetingly. This is an important distinction in how negative language is used to describe enlightenment.

IV. Conclusion: Negativity in Buddhist Emptiness

What is attempted above is a filling out of a model of Buddhist emptiness within the particular context of negative language; indeed, the language of emptiness pivots on negative language. There are three main functions of negative language in terms of emptiness: negative language strips away falsities, forces the boundaries of language of particular teachings, and operates as an internal logic in Buddhism. More specifically, negativity strips away falsities and exposes delusion; this is described at length above in the categories of liberation, rejection of reification, non-duality, and enlightenment. Negative language shows how emptiness informs each of these key teachings in Buddhism: that is accomplished through forcing the boundaries of language and as showing the internal logic within

Buddhism. Firstly, within each of the four listed categories, emptiness exposes the delusion, and thus suffering caused, of each category; additionally, emptiness also shows the “way out” for each category; this is accomplished through the process of negating delusion. Secondly, and more implicitly, emptiness “operates” as an internal logic to Buddhism, informing some of its most ancient and profound teachings. Negative language helps bring this out succinctly: emptiness is not only a vehicle to insight as to the true nature of things, but also to liberation from delusion and falsity.

There is something more, though, that does not fit the framework suggested above: writing/describing/inscribing emptiness is philosophically paradoxical because it is attempting to write that which is fundamentally negative, and, thus, impossible. Though the above analyses attempt to find a synthesis of how three major traditions within Buddhism view emptiness, the analyses are informed more by difference than by similarity. Admittedly, this may be due to internal reforms and development over long periods of time, but there is something fundamentally different in how negative language (in)forms emptiness. As discussed in Chapter Four, the distinction between difference and *différance* helps further how the analysis needs a new language of emptiness.

A further problem persists, too: as briefly noted above, the language of Buddhist emptiness denotes the metaphysical problem of *absence* of independent substance. If emptiness shows how the internal logic of Buddhism is to expose delusion and falsity, then there is something especially relevant with the metaphysics of absence: whether it is the absence of unconditioned substance or emptiness itself, absence is a major consideration in Buddhist emptiness. Chapter Four attempts to take the consideration of difference/*différance* coupled with the problem of the metaphysics of absence to further examine the negative language in Buddhist emptiness.

Chapter III

Apophatic Christian Thought: An Examination of Negative Language in Meister Eckhart

I. Introduction

As Buddhist emptiness was contextualized in its own terms in the preceding chapter, this chapter, too, is a contextualization of negativity in the Christian tradition in its own terms. Though an examination of negativity in a Christian context may well be addressed through many facets of historical theology, the selected prism is through that of the apophatic tradition, however loosely framed. The intent here is to provide a bit of historical grounding in how negative language shaped apophatic theology, and then a more specific analysis through the work of Meister Eckhart. The outcome of such an analysis is a further context of how negative language might be used later in Derridean deconstruction.

A. Contexts

In the history of Christian thought, apophatic theology plays an especially critical function where language is concerned. Like the apophatic literary device in philosophical discussion, Christian apophatic theology focuses upon the precision of language to denote that which cannot be positively (cataphatically) stated. Herein lays a central problem with apophatic theory: at some point language, paradoxically expressed in negation, breaks down; the question is if it is possible to press beyond that breakdown? At its best, apophaticism strips language of its assumptive nature and attempts to express ideas in paradox.

Like the preceding analyses above, this section attempts to explore Christian emptiness specifically through the lens of apophatic theology; furthermore, the analysis of Christian emptiness is methodologically similar to the analysis of Buddhist emptiness because negation, through questions of apophatic language, helps build a cross-section of the tradition. While it is admittedly impossible to reconstruct an entire history of Christian

apophaticism,⁴²⁴ what is attempted here is an exploration of the linguistic inner logic of apophatic theology as it applies to Christian emptiness. More specifically, this is accomplished through the framing of apophaticism with reference to Meister Eckhart. While the methodology of this section is cross-sectional in intent, the focus is particular themes in Eckhart's apophaticism; it requires much analysis to approach these nuanced and complex themes. Thus, the cross-sectional approach seeks to ground the focus of the analysis, an exploration of Meister Eckhart's apophaticism in relation to emptiness, within the context of a larger discussion of Christian emptiness.

B. Apophatic (Non)Logic

As apophatic inquiry is certainly not limited to Christianity, the methodological questions of its relevance help sort through a particular logic of negativity. The cross-section of apophatic theology in a Christian context helps establish if there is an inner logic to negative language and methodology where specific questions regarding emptiness are concerned. In a sense, the logic of apophaticism would have to be a "non-logic" because negativity demands a nuance of expression that would immediately cancel any affirmation of a seemingly cataphatic "logic." If there is an inner logic to apophaticism, it must remain fluid and in constant "motion" as a semantic expression. Michael Sells details this: "It is through a continual movement of dual propositions that meaning is generated. Once the movement stops, the mind is trapped in the false signification of the last single proposition."⁴²⁵ Furthermore, the inherent paradoxes that occur in any in-depth discussion of apophaticism detail a highly-nuanced and nearly unintelligible logic of expression: this is exactly where the "logic" or "non-logic" of apophatic theology is the most compelling because statements

⁴²⁴ While an attempt at a full reconstruction and analysis would be fruitful to an overall context, time and space compels the necessity of presenting a cross-section of the tradition as it applies to emptiness through apophaticism.

⁴²⁵ Michael Sells, "Apophasis in Plotinus: A Critical Approach," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 78, no. 1 / 2 (1985): 54.

remain in “motion,” or as Sells calls “...the attempt to find a meaningful formulation of transcendence that leads ineluctably to statements of radical immanence.”⁴²⁶

Within the logic (or non-logic) of apophaticism, dialectical expression attempts a compelling argument because affirmation and negation are linguistic struggles within the text to express something with more authenticity than simple cataphatic expressions. The influence of dialectical logic forms the root of the apophatic model of expression because it sets the language in perpetual motion. The point of dialectical meaning is applied to the below analysis, as the role of apophaticism within the context of Christian theology helps set language of emptiness and negativity into a sort of motion. The larger context of exploring the logic (or non-logic) of apophaticism in regards to emptiness and negativity in the Christian tradition is to explore the possible comparative tools within a moving, fluid language. Thus, religious language, at least as it applies to specific religious contexts, tries to express something more authentic in apophaticism.⁴²⁷

II. Meister Eckhart and Apophatic Theology: Nothingness in Negation, Unicity, and Detachment

Through the broader context of examining apophatic language and emptiness in Christian theology certainly takes on a plethora of thinkers, perhaps Meister Eckhart gives a thoroughgoing analysis of how emptiness may be contextualized and framed in an analytical manner. The three specific themes of unicity, negation, and detachment are meant to delimit how Eckhart’s apophaticism plays into a more general context of negative language and its further comparative value; the purpose is to take seriously a conclusion set forth by Davies: “...language itself, which (as Eckhart knows) is a fundamental part of the problem. Language

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ It is important to note here that apophaticism includes not only discussion about the nature of God, but also about the world itself. In the logic of viewing creation as a disclosure of the Creator, apophaticism works through the logic of the relationship of the Creator to creation.

mediates the world to us with all its finiteness in space and time...But if language is the obstacle, it is also paradoxically the place of our redemption.”⁴²⁸

A. Medieval Apophatic Theology: Toward a Definition

From the outset it must be stated that defining apophaticism is quite problematical because the implications drawn from apophatic thought extend well beyond negation. As indicated above, the preliminary implication of apophatic thought is the affirmation of a doctrine that is possible only through negation; further, it is helpful at this point to ask if negation not only provides the possibility of an affirmation, but also frames the question in a way that inherently shapes the outcome of the affirmation.⁴²⁹ Indeed, this question provides the necessary back-drop to the idea of experiential negation.

Contemporary scholars point well beyond the simplicity of negation to affirm the implications of radical negation as defined experientially. Denys Turner suggests that a further distinction is needed in what he calls “apophatic anthropology.” He proposes this distinction because influential medieval thinkers,

deny that I am “a self”; or at least, they appear to say that whatever may be the proper description of the fullest union of the human self with God, there is no distinction which we are able to make *between* that “self” and the God it is one with.⁴³⁰

Turner’s reading of many influential medieval thinkers leads him to suggest “apophatic anthropology” clarifies the meaning behind apophatic thought: that, inevitably, when one discusses the negation of God and the negation of the “self,” one is radically bringing the two together in a way that transcends immediate intimacy. Turner’s reading of Augustine fully integrates this idea of intrinsic intimacy where “God is not to be sought outside the self, for

⁴²⁸ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, xxxv.

⁴²⁹ Denys Turner alludes to this possibility: “Perhaps there is something to be learned from that Christian theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found.” Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 8. Italics original.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. 6. Italics original.

God is already there ‘within’, eternally more intimate to me than I am to myself.”⁴³¹ Another way to examine this point is, as Davies elucidates, that “God is already present to us in the way we know the world.”⁴³² Hence apophatic logic tends to suggest a very intimate relationship between the divine mystery and the individual self.

Though apophatic theology is certainly not confined to the medieval era, the historical connection with philosophical negation cannot be understated. Indeed, the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries brought about many shifts in philosophical and theological practice, in particular “[j]ust as the twelfth century clearly distinguishes the liberal arts from philosophy, so it established a complete separation between philosophy and theology.”⁴³³ The significance of the careful distinction between philosophical and theological goals is important because during this period, philosophy was “reduced...to the rank of a vassal and a serf of theology.”⁴³⁴ There is convincing evidence of this departure and distinction as early as the ninth century.⁴³⁵ Furthermore, moving into the fourteenth century, theological inquiry was becoming more “concentrated” and “austere”: “it was a time of controversy when the major positions had been laid out, Realist and Nominalist, Thomist and Scotist, Dominican and Franciscan, and free theological debate was often reduced to narrow-minded, party-political bickering.”⁴³⁶

The importance of raising such a distinction is important, not only “for they differ in the aim pursued (*sunt ad aliud*), the processes (*per aliud*), the methods (*secundum aliud*),”⁴³⁷ but also because the implications of the internal logic of negation go so far as to imply that the God of philosophy remains abstract and the God of theology is grounded in the Christian

⁴³¹ Ibid. 59.

⁴³² Davies, *God Within*, xiv.

⁴³³ Maurice de Wulf, “Western Philosophy and Theology in the Thirteenth Century,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Oct. 1918): 412.

⁴³⁴ Ibid. 413.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. 415.

⁴³⁶ Davies, *God Within*, 29.

⁴³⁷ de Wulf, “Western Philosophy and Theology in the Thirteenth Century,” 418.

scriptures and dogma.⁴³⁸ Rather, this distinction is later clarified in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas when he said, “If theology borrows from philosophy, it is not because it needs its help, but to place in a livelier light the truths it teaches.”⁴³⁹ The establishment of clear motives of theological inquiry by the late medieval era is important to the implications of apophaticism. Namely, when the “mystical” thought of Eckhart is examined, the motives differ where they are grounded in theological inquiry. Furthermore, it is argued below that the linguistic ideas behind apophatic thought are indeed dependent on philosophical frameworks. Bernard McGinn argues, “the goal of the mystic path, be it union with God, the universe, or some form of transformation or annihilation of our present condition, is beyond the power of human concepts or speech to describe.”⁴⁴⁰ What is attempted here is a construction of frameworks to analyze the shape and function of philosophical language as it may be applied conceptually in apophaticism.

B. Meister Eckhart and Apophaticism

In a preliminary examination of Meister Eckhart’s thought, it becomes evident that Eckhart was willing to push the logical limits of apophatic language. Indeed, John Macquarrie says that Eckhart’s writing was “sometimes careless,” and other sections of his work were clouded with “vagueness and ambiguity.”⁴⁴¹ Eckhart’s writings challenged the accepted orthodox teachings of the medieval church⁴⁴² because, as Macquarrie alleges, “Like other mystics, Eckhart tried to do justice to both the transcendence of God over creation, and his immanence in it...and seemed to verge on pantheism and to obscuring the distinction

⁴³⁸ Indeed, de Wulf highlights this clarification because it posed quite a response from the University of Paris: “‘What is true in philosophy,’ they said, ‘may be false in theology, and vice versa.’” Ibid. 427.

⁴³⁹ Ibid. 425.

⁴⁴⁰ Bernard McGinn, “The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 61, no. 1 (January 1981): 1.

⁴⁴¹ John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004): 136.

⁴⁴² Oliver Davies argues for a complex web of political and religious tensions that led to Eckhart’s post-mortem condemnation. See Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 27-45.

between God and human beings...⁴⁴³ Davies takes issue with such a reading of Eckhart, noting that “Meister Eckhart, it seems, is all things to all people.”⁴⁴⁴ Davies goes on to argue that Eckhart remains within the tradition, especially “within the Dominican tradition of sharing the fruits of *contemplatio*,” albeit in a provocative way.⁴⁴⁵ Furthermore, Davies grounds his analysis in how “Eckhart’s thinking centres on the concept of God as a form of knowing self-reflection, which flows out of itself and floods back into itself as the divine Word.”⁴⁴⁶ Elsewhere, Davies argues, it “...is not that he was introducing new teachings which were either different or superior to the doctrines of the Catholic Church, but rather that he was within the orthodox tradition and was being misunderstood. If his accusers charged Eckhart with heresy, then he charged them with stupidity.”⁴⁴⁷ This tension is *exactly* where the analysis of Eckhart’s work is most beneficial because themes like unity, negation, and detachment not only inform his writings, but also drive his theology in its epistemological claims of God.

Eckhart is often referred to as a “mystic” due to these internal textual tensions that lend credence to a real “experience” of God. While the term “mystic” is most certainly loaded with meaning, perhaps the best working definition (and indeed the spirit to which this term refers here, though the argument rests less with a definition of mysticism and more with an understanding of what he was referred to after his lifetime) is proposed by Davies: “...we will not go far wrong if we take it as meaning an *experience* of God...a sense within the human person that a transcendent and divine being or power is *immediately present* to him or

⁴⁴³ Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours*, 137.

⁴⁴⁴ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 1. He continues: “...largely at the popular level, it must be admitted that the charm for some lies in the marginality of Eckhart within the Christian world, paramountly the condemnation by Pope John XXII of twenty-eight propositions taken from his work.” Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. 4. Italics original. Davies calls this nuance a “dialectical tension” within the text. Ibid. 5.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, xiv-xv.

her.”⁴⁴⁸ Thus, when Eckhart is referred to as a “mystic” it is meant with the historical intelligibility that Eckhart believed he had an intimately close experience of God.⁴⁴⁹

The historical significance of Eckhart is important to highlight because, as Davies lucidly argues, “[t]he bare fact that such [biographical] information is recoverable is in itself significant, and is indication of Eckhart’s standing within society of his day, and to the degree to which he influenced it.”⁴⁵⁰ Davies rightly points to a historical criterion that argues Eckhart’s importance on the simple fact that his life and writings exist contemporaneously. The preservation of his German and Latin texts, coupled with the voluminous secondary texts that reflect on Eckhart’s ideas, strongly advocate the validity and significance of Eckhart’s influence upon the Christian tradition.

For Eckhart, the logical extreme of the apophatic model was found in the hiddenness of God. Treatment of the theme of nothingness is central to his thought: the hiddenness of God, expressed in themes like nothingness, negation, and detachment, is the fullness of the Godhead, or for Eckhart, the negation of negation. Specifically, the apophatic method of Eckhart “aims specifically to transcend images and to enter the ‘darkness’ and the ‘nothingness’ of the Godhead itself in a journey which leads the soul to the shedding of all that is superfluous, contrary or unequal to God as he is in his most essential Being.”⁴⁵¹ These themes are examined in light of Eckhart’s dependence upon Neoplatonic negation. As Davies highlights, “The soul follows a path of systematic negation of all which is not God, which eventually leads to a place in which it encounters God in an unknowable manner, in

⁴⁴⁸ Davies, *God Within*, 1. Italics original. More specifically, and perhaps this is reflected in this analysis, Davies clarifies this definition with the analytical term, *Wesensmystik*, meaning “mysticism” and “essence” or “inner nature.” Thus, the mysticism of Eckhart is, essentially, an experience of the divine insofar as God’s “essence” or “inner nature” are concerned. Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ While the term “mystic” is difficult to define, Andrew Weeks summarizes that Eckhart’s “sermons are mystical because they include all believers in the reciprocity of the divine knowing.” Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism: From Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Literary and Intellectual History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 93.

⁴⁵⁰ Davies, *God Within*, 30.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. 4.

ecstasy and in love.”⁴⁵² This philosophical backdrop is important to note because it frames the context of the analysis of the above themes.⁴⁵³ Even as Eckhart is often referred to as a mystic, the categories of such a designation are beyond the scope of this study; rather, for these purposes, it is more precise to look at his texts in the scope of nothingness, as they specifically relate to unicity, negation, and detachment.

C. Eckhart’s Themes of Nothingness

1. Introduction

The initial question that might be posed of Eckhart’s thinking has to do with the official condemnation of his teachings.⁴⁵⁴ While it is readily acknowledged that Eckhart’s ideas were challenging to orthodox doctrines, his historical veracity and relevance in the context of Christian apophaticism is demonstrable with the lens of negation and how his thought influenced later thinkers. As Davies highlights, a careful reading of Eckhart exposes a group of ideas that are “shot through with what are apparent contradictions and paradoxes.”⁴⁵⁵ Davies uses this point to argue Eckhart’s significance: “his thought, the heart of his work, is not a static but a dynamic one.”⁴⁵⁶ One of Eckhart’s most dynamic concepts is his appropriation of nothingness. Arguing that Eckhart’s proposition “conforms entirely to classical theses,”⁴⁵⁷ Reiner Schürmann positions Eckhart’s conclusions squarely in the concept of nothingness: “All that is created in itself is nothing...He then who loves the

⁴⁵² Ibid. 6.

⁴⁵³ Davies argues, “Eckhart’s vision is essentially a Platonic one in that it does not rest content with recognizing the presence of God and his laws in the created universe but seeks to transcend that universe through a faculty within the soul itself and to penetrate to levels of greater, more profound reality.” Ibid. 38.

⁴⁵⁴ It is important to note that, as Davies highlights, Eckhart’s original accuser, Nicholas of Strasbourg, “found Eckhart’s works to be thoroughly orthodox.” Ibid. 33. McGinn notes that “On March 27, 1329, the pope issued the bull “In argo dominico” absolving Eckhart of personal heresy but damning his memory and condemning twenty-eight propositions from his works. The pope was particularly exercised by Eckhart’s public preaching of these dangerous teachings.” Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 496.

⁴⁵⁵ Davies, *God Within*, 37.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, 62.

creature, loves nothingness and becomes himself nothingness.”⁴⁵⁸ His explanation of Eckhart’s concept of nothingness centers on a highly nuanced interpretation: “The created in itself is nothingness: what deserves attention in creatures is the origin of the gift, which is greater than its term.”⁴⁵⁹ The “origin” that Schürmann discusses in his explanation gets closer to Eckhart’s understanding of creation-as-nothingness: creation, itself, is inherently empty of its own existence; rather, what is behind creation “exists” in the proper sense. Beverly Lanzetta describes this idea of nothingness as “the verdant flowing of life itself – free from category, metaphysics, ontology, and so forth.”⁴⁶⁰ However, the category of nothingness means much more to an explanation of Eckhart’s theological propositions; arguably, nothingness shapes and centers his inquiry. Three themes of nothingness, namely negation, unicity, and detachment, are informed by Eckhart’s understanding of nothingness. What is discussed below is how these themes of nothingness contribute to a greater understanding of apophatic theology in terms of negative language.⁴⁶¹

2. Negation

Eckhart appeals to negation to approach speaking the unspeakable; negation is expressed most concretely in Eckhart’s assertion of the otherness of God in moving, paradoxical language. The importance here is specifically outlined as the shape and function of Eckhart’s use of negative language; what is attempted here is an elucidation of his negative

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” 253.

⁴⁶¹ Included in this analysis is a brief examination of Eckhart’s extant writings, German sermons, and to a lesser extent, his Latin sermons. Methodologically, what follows is somewhat patterned after the recent work of Bruce Milem, who follows a particular strand of thought in the work of Bernard McGinn. Along with McGinn, Milem argues that Eckhart’s philosophical writings and Latin sermons tend to delve into more “scholastic” ideas and constructs while his German sermons are geared more toward the laity and thus present a different side of Eckhart’s thinking. The analysis herein follows that same method, but yet with a blending of the different sources to attempt a comprehensive meaning insofar as nothingness is concerned. Following Milem and McGinn, what is attempted herein is a blending of the two “halves” of Eckhart’s thought. See Bruce Milem, *The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart’s German Sermons* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 16-17.

language as it applies to nothingness and the absolute otherness of God. Nothingness⁴⁶² as an apophatic category functions within Eckhart's language of God in a way that he calls God "nothing created,"⁴⁶³ "empty and free in himself,"⁴⁶⁴ "being beyond being: he is a nothingness beyond being."⁴⁶⁵ David Linge helps clarify this: "God is not being at all in any formal sense since he is the cause of being. As causes stand beyond their effects, God must be regarded as *beyond* being."⁴⁶⁶ Eckhart's terms fit squarely in apophatic theology insofar as they set God completely apart from all notions of being; the further implications of this extend to createdness: "All created things are nothingness, but this is remote from and alien to all createdness."⁴⁶⁷ Further, what allows Eckhart to probe deeper in the unspeakable-ness of God's absolute otherness is his appeal to the negation of the self:

When the soul enters the light that is pure, she falls so far from her own created somethingness into her nothingness that in this nothingness she can no longer return to that created somethingness by her own power. But God places himself with his uncreatedness beneath her nothingness and contains the soul in his somethingness. The soul has dared to become nothing and cannot return to herself by her own power – so far has she gone out of herself before God catches her.⁴⁶⁸

McGinn highlights the significance of this shift in language: "But when *esse* is understood transcendently, that is, as signifying the reality of God and cosignifying the nothingness of creatures, it is legitimately affirmed of the ineffable God."⁴⁶⁹ This paradox further delineates the otherness of God in the roll of the will, both in the volition of God and of creatures; a

⁴⁶² Eckhart defines this: "Nothingness is that which can receive nothing from anything, while something is that which can receive something from something." Meister Eckhart, *Qui mihi ministrant, me sequatur, et ubi sum, illic et minister meus erit* (Joh. 12:26); DW 58; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 133.

⁴⁶³ Meister Eckhart, *Qui sequitur iustitiam, diligetur a domino* (Prov. 15:9) *Beati, qui esuriunt, et sitiunt iustitiam: quoniam ipsi saturabuntur* (Matt. 5:6); DW 41; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 141.

⁴⁶⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, except illum in domum suam* (Luke 10:38); DW 2; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 163.

⁴⁶⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Renovamini spiritu* (Eph. 4:23); DW 83; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 236.

⁴⁶⁶ David E. Linge, "Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 46, no. 4 (December 1978): 471. Italics original.

⁴⁶⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Qui audit me non confundetur* (Ecclus. 24:30); DW 12; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 177.

⁴⁶⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Jesus in templum et coepit eicere vendentes et ementes* (Matt. 21:12); DW 1; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 156.

⁴⁶⁹ McGinn, "The God Beyond God," 7. Italics original.

further example of this moving language is extended in Eckhart's appropriation of the will: "...God must enter into us; for when someone wills nothing for themselves, then God must will on their behalf just as he does for himself."⁴⁷⁰ Davies asserts that in this "Eckhart plays upon the image of the emptiness of humility as an anticipation of the fulness of God's presence."⁴⁷¹

The volition of God connects back with Eckhart's understanding of the delineation between existence and nothingness: "What God loves, has existence, while what God does not love, has no existence..."⁴⁷² This culminates in a moving apophatic language within Eckhart's thought: "But with God there is a negation of negation: he is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God."⁴⁷³ The otherness of God and the dependence of creation upon the being of God are highlighted here in Eckhart's apophaticism: the negation of negation sets up the category for paradoxical existence because "...if God took back what is his, all creatures would fall into nothingness."⁴⁷⁴ Davies helps clarify this important aspect of Eckhart's thought: "His meaning is not that God exists while creatures do not exist, but that the existence of creatures is given them immediately by God, that it still remains in God, and that creatures have no existence other than this."⁴⁷⁵ This paradoxical existence allows Eckhart to assert the absolute freedom of God in relation to creation as a condition of "receptivity."⁴⁷⁶ Hence, Eckhart's language of negation, at least in terms of apophaticism, is focused heavily upon asserting the absolute otherness of God in relation to creation. Davies suggests that the "opposition" found in Eckhart's purposely paradoxical language is "brought

⁴⁷⁰ Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction, On True Obedience*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 3.

⁴⁷¹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 168.

⁴⁷² Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 92. Or, put differently: "Outside God there is only nothingness." Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 180.

⁴⁷³ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 182.

⁴⁷⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum, et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum* (Luke 10:38); DW 86; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 199.

⁴⁷⁵ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 105.

⁴⁷⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Et cum factus esset Jesus annorum duodecim* (Luke 2:42); DW 4; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 224.

into collision” to “communicat[e]...a transcendent truth.”⁴⁷⁷ To this end, Eckhart often wrestles squarely with the problem of being and nothingness and how this relates to God;⁴⁷⁸ indeed, his reading of Matthew 23:12 leads him to conclude, “For our entire being is founded purely on a process of becoming nothingness.”⁴⁷⁹ Beverly Lanzetta argues that this is the radical moment in Eckhart’s language of nothingness: “...he uncovers the road to liberation by going *through* the metaphysics of Being to the point (or breakthrough) where Being itself ceases to be (or unbecomes) in the ground and fount of divinity – the womb of nothingness.”⁴⁸⁰

Eckhart’s usage of negative language connotes an important aspect in his apophaticism: the dynamics of how negativity impacts his paradoxical expression is driven by a further concept – detachment. Detachment allows Eckhart to further expand his understanding of the otherness of God apophatically because it sets up the conditions for how Eckhart’s language moves within the concept of being.

3. Detachment

Eckhart uses the term *Abegeschiedenheit*, or “detachment,” as a key apophatic concept to attempt further insight into speaking the unspeakable. What follows is a brief examination of how *Abegeschiedenheit* features in Eckhart’s apophaticism; namely what is examined here is the function of how the language of detachment further leads to one of Eckhart’s major themes: unicity.

⁴⁷⁷ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 192.

⁴⁷⁸ Kieckhefer denotes this point specifically when he calls Eckhart’s “negative theology...[that] in which one stands in total receptivity to being or God.” Richard Kieckhefer, “Meister Eckhart’s Conception of Union with God,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 71, no. 3/4, (July-October 1978): 219.

⁴⁷⁹ Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction, On Inner and Outer Works*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 46.

⁴⁸⁰ Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” 256. Italics original.

In the most general sense, detachment for Eckhart means “that we should become free of ourselves and of all things.”⁴⁸¹ This is held in paradox, though, because the ultimate goal of humanity is “that we should become wonderfully united with him.”⁴⁸² Davies highlights the significance of Eckhart’s meaning of detachment: “true detachment means the spirit should transcend the created dimension.”⁴⁸³ The purpose of Eckhart’s *Abegeschiedenheit* is paradoxical: detachment from one’s self is necessary for unity with God. McGinn brings out this paradox more fully: “...the dynamic relation between God and creation must be grounded in the inner dynamism of the divine nature itself.”⁴⁸⁴ When this occurs, “...they are inwardly detached from the world and are in-formed by the love presence of their God.”⁴⁸⁵ This is accomplished through the volition of the self created in God’s image;⁴⁸⁶ the important note, though, is made with Eckhart’s connection between detachment and negation:

We must train ourselves in self-abandonment until we retain nothing of our own. All turbulence and unrest comes from self-will, whether we realize it or not. We should establish ourselves together with all that we might wish or desire in all things, in the best and most precious will of God through a pure ceasing-to-be of our will and desire.⁴⁸⁷

Something of the self, something of the individual volition (though created in the image of God), must be negated in order that detachment might be possible. This is no easy task; indeed Eckhart warns, “all suffering comes from attachment and affection.”⁴⁸⁸ Indeed, Eckhart goes so far with this language of negation as to suggest that “they should be so accustomed to being dead to themselves, stripped of their own form in God and transformed

⁴⁸¹ Meister Eckhart, *Misit dominus manum suam et tetigit os meum et dixit mihi, etc. Ecce constitui te super gentes et regna* (Jer. 1:9, 10); DW 53; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 127.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum in domum suam* (Luke 10:38); DW 2; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 163.

⁴⁸⁴ McGinn, “The God Beyond God,” 14.

⁴⁸⁵ Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction, On Detachment and Possessing God*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 11.

⁴⁸⁶ “...the revealing of God’s image within us makes us like God, for through this image we are like God’s image, which God is according to his naked essence.” Meister Eckhart, *Manete in me* (John 15:4), *Beatus vir qui in sapientia morabitur* (Ecclus. 14:22); DW 40; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 150.

⁴⁸⁷ Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction, On Spiritual Endeavour*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 42.

⁴⁸⁸ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 61.

in God's will."⁴⁸⁹ Eckhart's appeal to negation to explain detachment takes on other variant forms, too: "...if God is to make something of you or in you, then you must first become nothingness."⁴⁹⁰ Davies makes careful note of Eckhart's meaning here: "Eckhart speaks of our self-emptying less in terms of a metaphysical detachment as such but rather in the more moral terms of a classical humility."⁴⁹¹ This is approached in two ways: to forsake one's self and to forsake God. Eckhart's language uses negation specifically in both points, "If the spirit were to know its own pure state of detachment, then it would not be able to incline to any thing but would remain in its own detached state...no one can understand my words or my teaching unless they have first forsaken themselves."⁴⁹² In the latter point, Eckhart's apophaticism extends so far as to forsake God: "Therefore we ask God to free us from 'God' so that we may be able to grasp and eternally enjoy truth..."⁴⁹³ Eckhart's radical apophaticism emphasizes the complete detachment of the self, or more cogently, the dispelling of the illusion that the self may have independent volition from God. Weeks centers on the "...sacrifice which, to his listeners, meant nothing than accepting eternal loss."⁴⁹⁴ The meaning of the paradox is not lost in the interpretation of Eckhart's apophaticism: indeed, what Eckhart was pushing toward in his theology was the complete loss of an idol of God; as Lanzetta grapples with this meaning, "...precisely from the gift of radical detachment in

⁴⁸⁹ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 64. While Eckhart's language is certainly strongly-worded here, it is important to note that he makes explicit reference to Paul's "being separated from God for God's sake, for the sake of God's will and for his glory (cf. Rom. 9:3)." Ibid. Elsewhere, Eckhart says, "...if you wish to be filled with God and divine joy, then you must pour the creatures out of yourself." Ibid. 69.

⁴⁹⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Iustus in perpetuum vivet et apud dominum est merces eius* (Wisdom 5:16); DW 39; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 145.

⁴⁹¹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 167.

⁴⁹² Meister Eckhart, *In diebus suis placuit deo et inventus est iustus* (cf. Ecclesiastes 44:16-17); DW 10; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 173.

⁴⁹³ Meister Eckhart, *Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum* (Matthew 5:3); DW 52; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 205.

⁴⁹⁴ Weeks, *German Mysticism*, 84.

which the Godhead reveals itself as the source and ground of the ultimate *Gelassenheit* – ‘that’ which draws the soul into its own indistinction and nothingness.”⁴⁹⁵

Detachment is firmly grounded in negation because Eckhart says the detached person has “a pure heart” because it is “detached from all creatures...all creatures are a pure nothingness.”⁴⁹⁶ Davies clarifies this point: “The Eckhartian state of detachment in the world is one of complete self-abandonment, in which the giving up of the ego, of the sense of self, and the giving up of the sense of possession, are one.”⁴⁹⁷ Kieckhefer explains this concept differently: “...Eckhart speaks of a soul as rapt into eternity (*gezücket in ewicheit*), so that no transitory object can move it, it perceives nothing that is corporeal, and it takes no pleasure in worldly things.”⁴⁹⁸ The “purity of heart” is necessary for unification with God,⁴⁹⁹ though Eckhart’s apophaticism holds this purity of detachment with forsaking God in parallel tension. This tension sets up a paradox in his thought:

The soul must exist in a free nothingness. That we should forsake God is altogether what God intends, for as long as the soul has God, knows God and is aware of God, she is far from God. This then is God’s desire – that God should reduce himself to nothing in the soul so that the soul may lose herself...as she lost her createdness, God remained for himself as he is. And this is the greatest honour that the soul can pay to God, to leave God to himself and be free of him.⁵⁰⁰

Davies unpacks the dense meaning of the apophatic language at play: “detachment is at once our likeness to God, it is the state of our creaturely nothingness, it is our resignation to God’s will...Detachment, for Eckhart, is the kind of living in the world which results from the birth of God in the soul and the actualization of the God-like essence within us.”⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁵ Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” 252. Italics original.

⁴⁹⁶ Meister Eckhart, *In hoc apparuit caritas dei in nobis, quoniam filium suum unigenitum misit deus in mundum ut vivamus per eum* (1 John 4:9); DW 5a; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 189-190.

⁴⁹⁷ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 170.

⁴⁹⁸ Kieckhefer, “Meister Eckhart’s Conception of Union with God,” 215. Italics original.

⁴⁹⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 181.

⁵⁰⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Iustus in perpetuum vivet et apud dominum est merces eius* (Wisd. 5:16); DW 39; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 144-145.

⁵⁰¹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 174.

a. Annihilation and Detachment

Detachment, then, is a deeply revealing mode of paradoxical being and non-being because the soul is detached from the individual identity and ready for the “grace” of God. The self is annihilated purposely because it is “an ego-less form of being in which our normal self-centered concerns are released in a state of profound equanimity and detachment.”⁵⁰² Kieckhefer highlights Eckhart’s thinking that the “soul has fallen ‘into nothingness’ (*nihtes niht*), and cannot return to its ‘created something’ without divine help.”⁵⁰³ Kieckhefer goes on to argue that, according to a careful reading of Eckhart, individual identity is not lost in annihilation, “that among spiritual beings it is possible for two individuals to be united in such a way that one is absorbed into the other, while both are preserved.”⁵⁰⁴ This is not without paradox, as Davies highlights: “[detachment] embraces the sense of non-being which results from our containment in the Godhead, who is beyond being.”⁵⁰⁵ Robert Dobie’s analysis of one of Eckhart’s most radical arguments is worth quoting at length:

God is being transcending both being and nothingness. This means that even God must cease being a god, that is, a “this,” and must divest God’s self of all God’s properties (Eigenschaften) as a “this” and unite God’s self to me and my “is-ness” if God is truly and really to be God and know God’s self as God just as much as I must divest myself of all creatureliness and unite myself to God’s “is-ness” if I am to know and experience God as my innermost existence.⁵⁰⁶

Furthermore, the logic of such an affirmation through the negation of negation is quite startling: “human nature in its purity is nothing other than the divine nature itself. For existence or “is-ness” is God; and to the degree that we live out of our very own “is-ness,” we

⁵⁰² Davies, *God Within*, 59. He clarifies this point further by stating that Eckhart’s logical conclusion can be described as “a virtual extinguishing of the created human will in the presence of the will of God.” Ibid. 62.

⁵⁰³ Kieckhefer, “Meiser Eckhart’s Conception of Union with God,” 216. Italics original.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Davies, *God Within*, 59.

⁵⁰⁶ Robert Dobie, “Meister Eckhart’s ‘Ontological Philosophy of Religion,’” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 82, no. 4 (October 2002): 583.

live out of God's "is-ness."⁵⁰⁷ Through detachment, then, this negation of negation actualizes because in it "God is not only the presupposition of all thought but also the precondition for all genuine freedom and authentic selfhood."⁵⁰⁸ For Eckhart, disinterest is the mode by which detachment becomes manifest: "Disinterest is best of all, for by it the soul is unified, knowledge is made pure, the heart is kindled, the spirit wakened, the desires quickened, the virtues enhanced."⁵⁰⁹ Detachment allows for the "purity of existential affirmation" because the negation of negation is the strongest, most authentic, affirmation of God.⁵¹⁰ Macquarrie reasons that the affirmation of God is strong in negation because, "If God were always clearly manifest, there would be no need to seek him, and the quest for God would come to an end; if he were always absent, we would give up the quest through discouragement."⁵¹¹ Weeks further clarifies: "The annihilation of time, place, and number as qualifiers in the divine knowledge has as its corollary this identity of human subject and divine object."⁵¹²

Eckhart's language of detachment plays a vital role in understanding the scope of his theology; indeed, Eckhart's language points to the concept of unicity. Detachment, wherein the self is completely lost in God, leads to unicity with God. Eckhart's language within the apophatic movements spells out this loss of self, the loss of ego, and further unity with the unicity that is God.

4. Unicity

If there is one concept that brings together Eckhartian thought, it would be the idea of the *Einheitsmetaphysik*, or (contextually) the unicity of God. Concepts like nothingness, negation, and detachment help build the apophatic model to grasp Eckhart's language of

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. 584.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. 585.

⁵⁰⁹ Meister Eckhart, "About Disinterest," in *German Mystical Writings*, ed. Karen Campbell (New York: Continuum, 1991), 91.

⁵¹⁰ Dobie, "Meister Eckhart's 'Ontological Philosophy of Religion,'" 585.

⁵¹¹ Macquarrie, *The Two Worlds Are Ours*, 142-143.

⁵¹² Weeks, *German Mysticism*, 81.

unicity. When he phrases statements like, “God is a word: an unspoken word,”⁵¹³ Eckhart is getting closer to his apophatic concept of unicity in God. Elsewhere: “Only God flows into all things, their very essences. Nothing else flows into something else. God is in the innermost part of each and every thing, only in its innermost part, and he alone is *one*.”⁵¹⁴ Further, the relationship with humanity is also one of unicity: “He never gave anything to God, nor did he ever receive anything from God; rather there is a single oneness here, a pure union.”⁵¹⁵ Unity with God, though, is paradoxical, because it requires being nothingness: “You should sink your ‘being-you’ into his ‘being-him,’ and your ‘you’ and his ‘him’ should become a single ‘me’ so that with him you shall know in eternity his unbecome ‘isness’ and his unnameable ‘nothingness.’”⁵¹⁶ What is attempted here is an examination of Eckhart’s unicity with direct reference to the form and function of his language. In order to examine Eckhart’s language of unicity, two approaches are taken: one deals with the unicity of God within God’s own self and the other deals with humanity and the goal of unity with God.

a. Unicity and God

Eckhart’s idea of the unicity of God is defined by his insistence that God is completely “one” in God’s own self and, further, that speaking of God is best done through speaking denials. Eckhart’s language in describing God is often apophatic insofar as he asserts the “simple ground, to the still desert, into which distinction never peeped, neither Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit.”⁵¹⁷ Apophaticism is linked solidly with his concept of the “One” because he uses language like, “Everything which is multiple depends upon the One, but the

⁵¹³ Meister Eckhart, *Misit dominus manum suam et tetigit os meum et dixit mihi, etc., Ecce constitui te super gentes et regna* (Jer. 1:9-10); DW 53; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 128.

⁵¹⁴ Meister Eckhart, *The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity. On the Epistle Gal. 3:16-22. Deus unus est*; LW XXIX; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 258. Italics original.

⁵¹⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Qui audit me non confundetur* (Ecclus. 24:30); DW 12; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 177.

⁵¹⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Renovamini spiritu* (Eph. 4:23); DW 83; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 237.

⁵¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, [no title, *German Sermon*]; DW 48; W 60; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 136.

One depends upon nothing.”⁵¹⁸ This One is separated with negative language with what Eckhart calls the “Godhead.” The Godhead is a further negation of “God” to clarify that absolute unity – and consequent nothingness – of God: “All that is in the Godhead is One, and of this no one can speak. God acts, while the Godhead does not act. There is nothing for it to do, for there is no action in it...The difference between God and Godhead is that one acts and other does not.”⁵¹⁹ Eckhart’s term, *Gottheit* (Godhead), denotes a further negative aspect of God: “Eckhart uses the term Godhead (*Gottheit*) to refer to God as he is in himself, in the stillness and hiddenness of his own unity, and term God (*Gott*) to refer to the divine nature in its activity and relatedness.”⁵²⁰ This clarification in language is essential to Eckhart’s understanding of unicity because “...God contains all things in himself in fullness; therefore God seeks nothing beyond himself but seeks something only in the fullness in which it already exists within himself. And no creature can comprehend anything as it exists in God.”⁵²¹ McGinn’s reading of Eckhart casts warning upon making explicit use of Eckhart’s concepts where unity is concerned: “From the standpoint of...negation, neither Trinity nor Unity are fully adequate terms to give knowledge of a God who is ‘one without unity and three without trinity.’”⁵²²

The metaphors Eckhart uses to express the differences between *Gott* and *Gottheit* are purposeful; as Linge explains, “[b]eyond all names, beyond goodness, truth or being, the Godhead is the *Abgrund*, the abyss of deity. Desert, wilderness, darkness, nothing are all

⁵¹⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 184.

⁵¹⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Nolite timere eos, qui corpus occidunt, animam autem occidere non possunt* (Matt. 10:28); W 56; DP 26; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 234.

⁵²⁰ Linge, “Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,” 473. Italics original. McGinn also substantiates this clarification when he states that “[o]ne classic entry into the problem of Eckhart’s thought is through the investigation of the distinction between the manifested Trinitarian God and the hidden Godhead.” McGinn, “The God Beyond God,” 3.

⁵²¹ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 180.

⁵²² McGinn, “The God Beyond God,” 11. McGinn is quoting from Eckhart. McGinn goes further in his analysis: “Eckhart tells us that if we could see God’s essence, the name that we would give it would be *unum*, Absolute Unity.” Ibid. 13. Italics original.

terms he uses to point to the Godhead.”⁵²³ Eckhart’s *Gottheit* opens up his apophatic language because he is able to approach the unspeakable in his language of paradoxical unity:

This distinction between the trinitarian God and the hidden unity of the Godhead might be interpreted as a breakthrough beyond Christian trinitarianism to a form of mystical unitarianism...[f]rom the standpoint of...negation, neither Trinity nor Unity are fully adequate terms to give knowledge of a God who is ‘one without unity and three without trinity.’⁵²⁴

Perhaps Eckhart goes the furthest in his apophatic language when he describes the absolute unicity of God: “If I say that God is good, then I am adding something to him. Oneness on the other hand is a negation of negation and a denial of denial...But with God there is a negation of negation: he is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God...God is one; he is the negation of negation.”⁵²⁵ This idea, the negation of negation, approaches a particular limit of apophatic language (a sort of double negative); for Eckhart the expression is particularly useful because it both delimits the absolute oneness of God and the negation of that which is not God.⁵²⁶ Davies explains this further:

...the phrase ‘negation of negation’ expresses the infinity of God. To define the nature of something created is at the same time to say what it is not, while in defining the nature of God, the uncreated, we negate the principle of negation itself. The negation of negation thus becomes ‘the purest form of affirmation as applied to God.’⁵²⁷

The function of the language, especially as it relates to *Gottheit*, is the prevention of adding attributes to God insofar as God is simply “One.” Davies argues along similar lines:

“...Eckhart’s clear preference for speaking of God in radically negative terms, so that nothing

⁵²³ Linge, “Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,” 473-474. Italics original.

⁵²⁴ McGinn, “The God Beyond God,” 3; 11.

⁵²⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 182.

⁵²⁶ Lanzetta makes note of Eckhart’s movement within the dialectic of the negation of negation: “Eckhart insists that absolute negation takes place not only within the soul but also with God itself: God becomes and unbecomes.” Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” 264. Italics original.

⁵²⁷ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 109.

is ‘added’ to him.”⁵²⁸ This is illustrated through Eckhart’s use of the phrasing, “the whole abyss of his Godhead” because it denotes the simplicity of God’s oneness.⁵²⁹

b. God’s Unicity and Humanity

Central to Eckhart’s theology is his understanding of humanity’s unity with the unicity of God. The basic apophatic model revolves around the “empty” soul, “emptier of all things she is which are not God, then the more purely she grasps God and does so in him, becoming one with God...”⁵³⁰ Eckhart’s specific terminology, or the “ground” (*grund*) of the soul, denotes the special nature of this unity; in other words, the *grund* of the soul is the absolute point of emptiness where God may “enter” the soul. Eckhart is careful with this term, though, because he specifically states, “Only pure Godhead can enter the ground of the soul,”⁵³¹ or that it is the emptiness of God (hence the *Gotttheit*) that meets the empty soul (in her *grund*). This emptiness is described metaphorically as “poverty” as “God can find no place in us then, for with this poverty we attain that which we have eternally been and shall for ever remain. Here God is one with our spirit, and this is poverty in its ultimate form.”⁵³² Metaphorical poverty is, for Eckhart, the signification of emptiness in the *grund* of the soul: “For God does not intend here to be a place in someone where he can act, but if there is to be true poverty of spirit, someone must be so free of God and all his works that if God wishes to act in the soul he must himself be the place in which he can act...In this poverty, we attain again the eternal being we once enjoyed...”⁵³³ In this metaphor, poverty works to illustrate how the soul “should be stripped of all things and emptied of them, outside and within...”⁵³⁴

⁵²⁸ Ibid. 115.

⁵²⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Qui audit me non confundetur* (Ecclus. 24:30); DW 12; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 176.

⁵³⁰ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 71.

⁵³¹ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 181.

⁵³² Meister Eckhart, *Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum* (Matt. 5:3); DW 52; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 208.

⁵³³ Ibid. 207.

⁵³⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Et cum factus esset Jesus annorum duodecim* (Luke 2:42); W 4; PF 4; DP 59; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 225.

It is the emptiness of the soul that allows the *Gottheit* to enter the soul in unicity, and then to realize the full implication of the *imago dei*: "...the revealing of God's image within us makes us like God, for through this image we are like God's image, which God is according to his naked essence."⁵³⁵ It is this point where Eckhart's apophaticism is the most direct and precise in his use of unicity: "...that between that person and God there is no distinction, and they are one"⁵³⁶ and furthermore, that Eckhart's full expression of unicity is expressed: "That is why the whole of Scripture was written and why God created the whole world and all the orders of angels: so that God could be born in the soul and the soul in God."⁵³⁷ Turner unpacks this idea further:

...because God's *esse indistinctum* cannot be distinguished from the *esse distinctum* of the created human by any relation of displacement, so that to be the one entails not being the other; therefore, my being God, infinite, uncreated, "nothing," cannot be exclusive of my being finite, created, a *hoc aliquid*, an *esse distinctum*.⁵³⁸

The progression (if it may be called that) to God's unicity is, itself, paradoxical. Eckhart describes it as a "pathless way, which is free and yet fixed, in which we are raised and exalted above ourselves and all things, with neither will nor images, although not yet in substantial being."⁵³⁹ This "pathless way" is apophatically conceived in the negation of all things, images, idols, and even God himself. Eckhart's vision of unicity means that humanity is "like the divine nature; in itself it is one and has nothing in common with anything."⁵⁴⁰ For

⁵³⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Manete in me (John 15:4)*, *Beatus vir qui in sapientia morabitur (Ecclus. 14:22)*; DW 40; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 150.

⁵³⁶ Ibid. 149. Davies explains further: "The Greek patristic tradition which was at least part of Eckhart's inheritance like also to see the character of human nature as being 'in the image' of God in relation to Christ, the Son, who is himself God's very Image." Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 128.

⁵³⁷ Meister Eckhart, *In illo tempore missus est angelus Gabriel a deo: ave gratia plena, dominus tecum (Luke 1:26, 28)*; DW 38; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 113.

⁵³⁸ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 166. Italics original. McGinn argues a similar point: "To conceive of God as *unum* is to conceive of him as simultaneously distinct and indistinct, at once immanent and transcendent." McGinn, "The God Beyond God," 7.

⁵³⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum, et mulier quadam, Martha nomine, excepit illum (Luke 10:38)*; DW 86; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 197.

⁵⁴⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Ego elegi vos de mundo (John 15:16)*; DW 28; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 121.

Eckhart, unification with the Godhead is the point of existence and, paradoxically, non-existence. For this becoming is really becoming no-thing.

D. Eckhartian Apophatic Language

A close examination of Eckhart's language is an important lens to approach his apophaticism; but, like alongside other interpretations, it is one way to appropriate his concepts. Perhaps what makes Eckhart so engaging to readers so long after his death is his peculiar and original approach to language. The relevance of Eckhart's theology has, as Davies puts it, "the deepest consequences for our daily living."⁵⁴¹ It is something in that paradoxical language that contemporary readers find engaging and relevant; the struggle is to comprehend his concepts, especially in apophaticism. In order to come to some understanding of Eckhart's form and function of his language of apophaticism, the concepts of negation, detachment, and unicity are examined above. However, it is important to note that these concepts are not well examined as separate entities or ideas. Rather, they have a certain fluidity because they flow in and out of one another, interspersed with many other challenging concepts, to form some kind of meaningful approach to nothingness. One concept cannot be understood without comprehending other aspects of Eckhart's thought, and additionally, Eckhart's usage of metaphor, antithesis, dialectic, paradox, and poetic expression only complicate possible interpretations. However, in that same light, those elements also make Eckhart's approach to nothingness through negation, detachment, and unicity fluid, engaging, and relevant ideas.

Perhaps one area of Eckhart's thought that allows these linguistic concepts to come together is in his concept of the negation of negation. It is here that his expression comes to its full connective veracity. Though the idea of the negation of negation appears in various religious traditions and their literatures, perhaps what makes Eckhart's thinking manifestly

⁵⁴¹ Davies, *God Within*, 57.

significant is his *juncture* between the application of negation with the virtue of detachment and the efficacy of unicity. This means that the disappearance of the self into nothingness through detachment exposes the inner-dynamism of the human soul and its connection with the divine. Though Eckhart appears cautious of existential language, and perhaps even more so of language relating to nothingness, his affirmation of the divine mystery of the Godhead points the trajectory of nothingness toward emphatic emptiness. The connective power rests in how this juncture culminates in the efficaciousness of his language to express the radical transcendence of God in negation. This transcendence is expressed in different ways in negation, detachment, and unicity; the negation of negation shifts this language into a comparative mode insofar as it allows Eckhart to convey the otherness – and yet entirely intimate – nature of a God who defies cataphatic description. The language does not cease to push these limits; the language to express the unicity of God is hard won in Eckhart's eyes. What might be gained from the above examination is the beginning of how that language is hard won and its consequent comparative value.

III. Conclusion: Apophatic Language and Comparative Methodologies

The purpose of this section is to examine how Christian apophaticism approaches speaking what is fundamentally unspeakable. While space and time necessitated a cross-section of the tradition with special reference to the function of apophatic language, there are some significant observations to be made. Perhaps it is best to discuss what might be the most noteworthy paradox that emerges from the above examination: it seems the driving momentum behind apophatic language, at least in the thought of Eckhart, is pushing negation so far as to grasp absolute unicity. The paradox is inescapable as a function of the language; namely, it is vital to tear down the very structure of language itself in order to “assert” unicity. This paradox is explored above in the discussions of unicity in Eckhart, but there are further implications.

This section on Christian apophaticism, in order to explore the function of language in terms of a cross-sectional study, focused on an examination of Eckhartian themes of negation as expressed in negation, detachment, and unicity. Though this is but a minor selection of thinkers and concepts within the general category of Christian apophaticism, what is presented here is meant to tease out some of the more significant aspects of the tradition. What holds these sections together is an examination of language and the role it plays in the particular logic of negation. As apophaticism tears down the conventions of normal speaking (i.e. the cataphatic), what is left? More importantly, what are the comparative implications of apophaticism?

What becomes apparent in the above examination is, primarily, that apophaticism is not so much about simple negation as it is about where language breaks down. Speaking denials, negations, and no-thing has an inherent absurdity; the value in this absurdity is found in the revaluation of the meaning behind the language, the symbolism, the metaphor, and the poetry within the expression. As Tobin argues, "...one can accomplish more by establishing what God is not, by removing imperfections and limitations from our notion of Him. This frees a positive core which we cannot grasp."⁵⁴² Eckhartian apophaticism, in particular, squares with the absurdity of negative language.

Perhaps one of the driving features behind apophatic language is what Sells calls the movement of symbolism from the "referential to the nonreferential."⁵⁴³ No longer may language simply act as a pointer to objects, ideas, actions, or "references." Instead, something unsaid, something hidden shakes the foundation of referential assumption and forces a movement within the expression insofar as negation forces a "nonreferential" asymmetry. Negative language causes this asymmetry because the functionality of words is

⁵⁴² Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, 83.

⁵⁴³ Sells, "Apophysis in Plotinus," 51.

called into perpetual question; at best, language must be bracketed as inherently faulty.

Eckhart's struggle to express the ineffable God is hard won; his apophaticism takes seriously the critique that the concept of reference no longer works within a "system" of language.

Removing reference from language logically means removal of predicates; this is accomplished with negative language. For Eckhart's unicity, negation serves as the method to tear down predicates within referential language. This creates a movement within the language because the concept is inherently ineffable, inexpressible, and unspeakable.

Nevertheless, Eckhart has much to say regarding unicity. What Sells' argues in his concept of "infinite regress" gets closer to the methodological implications Eckhart's language.

Infinite regress within the language, shifted by negation, not only removes predicates, but also, quite paradoxically, gets closer to unity. The pattern of infinite regress within the linguistic system of expression systematically and methodically exposes the faults and gaps of language. Turner calls this a "rhetorical strenuousness" in Eckhart because "...he twists the discourse, breaks it up, recomposes it. His rhetorical devices are *artifices*."⁵⁴⁴ However, the intention is still the same: language is not a means in itself; language does not exist in and for itself; in the context of expressing inexpressible unicity, language must remain but a tool to bring out deeper meaning. Turner explains this further: "...[Eckhart] knows perfectly well that the unsayable cannot be placed within the grasp of speech. Yet he will use speech, necessarily broken, contradictory, absurd, paradoxical, conceptually hyperbolic speech, to bring to insight the ineffability of God."⁵⁴⁵

The value in an examination of Eckhart's thought rests in the *failure* of language to speak the unspeakable. Eckhart centers on this failure and begins to grasp unicity with God through negation. The failure of language as shown in negativity paradoxically "creates"

⁵⁴⁴ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 151. Italics original.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

new space to consider the possibility of new linguistic constructs. The movement of language in Eckhart's metaphorical, dialectical, and antithetical language, creates a comparative tool by which to consider other places where negativity has similarly broken down language.

The theoretical question is, of course, whether or not such broken language, perhaps now moving forward in speaking the unspeakable, is able to lend comparative insight with an entirely different tradition. Perhaps it is the exposure of the weakness of language, the breakdown of predicates, metaphors, and referential symbols that gets closer to a tradition where a similar movement of language (in infinite regress) is demonstrable. However, this is not enough by itself to draw convincing parallels in the logic. If the failure of language, as demonstrated in the apophaticism of Eckhart, might contribute to the discussion, then another methodological input is needed to expand the logic. Something more is needed to bridge the gap in such broken language, something that shows how Christianity and Buddhism might be brought together more productively in negativity.

Though the purpose of this chapter has been primarily illustrative and demonstrative of particular apophatic themes as they apply to negative language, it has also set up the framework with which further analysis might be conducted. Derridean themes of deconstruction might now be addressed with the grammar of Christian apophaticism in that specific locus of *aporia*. Furthermore, this is the bridge with which Christian and Buddhist concepts of emptiness might be explored.

Chapter IV

Buddhist Emptiness and Derridean Différance: Marking the Path (Not) Taken

I. Introduction

The language of Buddhist emptiness borders on inaccessible because it is highly nuanced, contextualized differently amongst the traditions, and it is meant to convey a seminal “truth” in Buddhist thinking. As Chapter Three detailed various contexts of emptiness, the task in this section is to begin to explore the relationship with negativity, especially as it connects with some of the deeper foundations of how language functions in Buddhism. There is an inherent problem with this methodology, though, because it assumes that language can convey this function, even meaning, of emptiness through a prism of negativity. This, too, might be a falsity, unless there is another connection to help bridge the concepts together in a way that stands on the limits, on the *aporia*, of language. More specifically, while it seems initially odd to connect the work of a twentieth-century, French-speaking language theorist with that of the illusive concept of Buddhist emptiness, the fruitful conversation that emerges centers on a contextualization of how negativity functions within Buddhism. Indeed, it is this *aporia* that provides the initial connection of how Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction might lend a different way of reading, writing, and communicating emptiness. The levels here are multi-faceted because emptiness is examined through the prism of negativity; in a similar way, deconstruction is examined through the lens of Derridean *différance*. Here Buddhist language is not understood as “Buddhist” as such, but rather is opened to the same difference that informs/conforms/deforms all language structures; emptiness read with *différance* means not a/the definitive emptiness, but rather an emptiness that informs all other internal structures within Buddhism. In this way, negativity functions as the mode by which *différance* might be read on/with/beside emptiness.

As will be discussed in more detail below, Derrida's concern is not with religious thought as such. Though he has much to say about the role of "religion" within the context of deconstruction, Derrida seems to go in different directions (disseminations), taking aim squarely at Western metaphysics. This does not mean, however, that Buddhist negativity and Derridean negativity are incompatible or unable to be compared. In broader terms, how might Derrida's negativity differ from that of Buddhist negativity? Might a discussion in the contrasts of such understandings of negativity offer new insight into understanding Buddhist emptiness?

A. Buddhism: Religious Negativity?

While there is certainly legitimate and productive discussion as to whether or not Buddhism might be considered a "religion" (at least in the Western sense) or if it should be solely considered a philosophy, that point is not taken up here. However, as a very general statement, it might be argued that the aforementioned efforts to flesh out emptiness as a foundational aspect of Buddhism, whether as an experiential component, philosophical point, or textual pivot to other teachings, the argument may be grounded in the assertion that emptiness has some sort of basic precept in Buddhist thought. To that end, is it fair to also assert that if Buddhism might be considered a religion, emptiness acts as a textual/experiential/philosophical negativity that runs through numerous Buddhist teachings? Thus, to this point, it might be said that emptiness has a textual effect, albeit vis-à-vis negativity, and that it drives religious teaching. This might be referred to as *religious negativity* as it plays a pivotal role in the teachings, offers some sort of salvific effect (however nuanced),⁵⁴⁶ and drives textual meaning for the religious community. Emptiness is

⁵⁴⁶ By salvific effect, this does not carry the same implications or philosophical / theological baggage as Western salvation. Rather, what is intended here is an understanding that emptiness drives the religious adherent in meditation, has real "power" in how other teachings are understood, and that it plays a role in eventually attaining nirvana. While this is certainly open to debate, the intent here is to examine emptiness as if the aforementioned statements are "true" in that they affect not only Buddhists, but the tradition itself.

expressed as negativity because it “is” fundamentally what “is not.” Emptiness is religiously negative because it is “made up” of the insubstantiality of all sentient beings, all phenomena, and all illusory reality. Emptiness, as such, might be considered what “is” religious negation in Buddhism.

Buddhist emptiness, discussed herein as a sort of religious negativity, has foundational implications for the religious tradition. However, the question remains of whether or not negativity is approachable in Buddhist texts; the further implication here is that emptiness, at least as it is expressed in extant Buddhist texts, points to some/no-thing outside of itself, whether that is experiential, philosophical, or metaphysical. While the implications of religious negativity in Buddhism are discussed below, the point here is that negativity within a specific religious tradition has “value” in its effect upon the tradition. In this case, the insubstantiality of all phenomenal existence, of all sentient beings, is the foundational component of religious negativity as it applies to Buddhism.

B. Derridean Negativity

As a matter of brief summary so far, the argument that Buddhist emptiness shares some relationship with Derridean *différance* could be elucidated with the proposal that deconstruction is a fundamentally negative (non)concept because it is “parasitic.” It might be called parasitic because deconstruction requires that something else be said first; deconstruction responds to what is produced, but it does not produce itself.⁵⁴⁷ David Loy explains, “This is why deconstruction is necessarily parasitic: not believing that there is any non-metaphorical truth-in-itself to be signified, it needs as ‘host’ another text which attempts

⁵⁴⁷ For Derrida, this is thoroughly a metaphysical problem: “It could be shown that metaphysics has always consisted in attempting to uproot the presence of meaning, in whatever guise, from *différance*; and every time that a region or layer of pure meaning or a pure signified is allegedly rigorously delineated or isolated this gesture is repeated.” Derrida, *Positions*, 32. Italics original.

to provide such a signified.”⁵⁴⁸ Deconstruction latches onto what is conveyed and searches out what is *not* being written, the silenced voices within the text, the emptiness within fixed textual meaning.⁵⁴⁹ Thus, if *différance* is one of Derrida’s “tools” in his deconstructive toolbox, it, too, “is” fundamentally negative.⁵⁵⁰ In Derrida’s own lengthy description of *différance*, he elucidates the negative nature of its effect upon a text:

...we had to note *that* difference *is not*, does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present (*on*). And we will have to point out everything *that it is not*, and, consequently, that it has neither existence nor essence. It belongs to no category of being, present or absent. And yet what is thus denoted as difference is not theological, not even in the most negative order of negative theology.⁵⁵¹

And elsewhere:

Nothing – no present and in-different being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*.⁵⁵²

Within the corpus of Derridean thought, the purposeful misspelling of “difference” is to show the play of differences within any system of thought. The play of differences, using the further stratagem of negation, calls into question the very nature of systematization, of language (*contra-logos*), and of definitive meaning. Magliola calls this one of many, “...provisional names for what somehow ‘constitutes’ *that which survives* absolute negative reference.”⁵⁵³ *Différance*, then, calls into question even negativity itself, as a function, as a meaning, as an effect upon other

⁵⁴⁸ David Loy, “The Clôture of Deconstruction: A Mahāyāna Critique of Derrida,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. xxvii, no. 1 (March 1987): 76.

⁵⁴⁹ This is, of course, a summary of deconstruction, though it is readily acknowledged that the full implications of deconstruction, while addressed elsewhere in some measure, are quite complex. The general summary is presented with the hope that deconstruction might be shown to be parasitic and, thus, negative by nature.

⁵⁵⁰ Derrida suggests, “...*différance* finds itself enmeshed in the work that pulls it through a chain of other ‘concepts,’ other ‘words,’ other textual configurations.” Ibid. 40. Italics original.

⁵⁵¹ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, 134. Italics original.

⁵⁵² Derrida, *Positions*, 28. Italics original.

⁵⁵³ Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, 21. Italics original.

subjects/objects.⁵⁵⁴ Moreover, if *différance* is “present” in a text prior to the writing of that text, does this not show a certain parasitic value?

Is this the same as religious negativity? Would it be possible to compare religious negativity (in this instance as it applies to Buddhist emptiness) with the (non)function of negativity in Derridean *différance*? Is Derridean negativity, understood with *différance*, comparable with religious negativity?

II. Difference and *Différance*: A Buddhist (Re)Working of Terms; Definitions(?)

Derrida’s intentional misspelling of *différance* first appears in his 1963 essay, “Cogito and the History of Madness,”⁵⁵⁵ and he later expands his study of difference / *différance* in an article that “...expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until ‘later’ what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible.”⁵⁵⁶ Stemming as a reaction to specific Western thinkers like Heidegger, Husserl, and Saussure,⁵⁵⁷ *différance* shares many sympathies with Buddhist critiques of language.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ John Caputo helps make the case here; he expands the idea of how the play of differences allow for questioning even negativity itself: “*Différance* is the name of a confession or a circumfession, that is, an operation of textuality in virtue of which we confess that there can be no fundamental or transcendental ontology, neither phenomenological nor psychoanalytic, but only a multiplicity of discursive strategies that *mutatis mutandis* differ with the demands of the irreducible plurality of subject matters under study.” John D. Caputo, “Love Among the Deconstructibles: A Response to Gregg Lambert,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2 (April 2004): 52.

⁵⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31-63.

⁵⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Difference,” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129. Italics original. In this text, Allison does not employ italics or the accent mark in his writing of *différance*. When quoting from this text directly, fidelity to this translation is maintained here. Derrida offers various nuances of meaning through his essay, including: “We provisionally give the name *différance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation.” Ibid. 129-130. Italics original. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of Derrida’s translators, calls “[t]he ‘-ance’ ending...the mark of that suspended status. Since the difference between ‘difference’ and ‘différance’ is inaudible, this ‘neographism’ reminds us of the importance of writing as a structure.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), xliii.

⁵⁵⁷ Derrida clarifies: “...the difference of forces in Nietzsche, Saussure’s principle of semiological difference, differing as the possibility of (neurone) facilitation, impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as the irreducibility of the trace of the other in Levinas, and the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger.” Ibid. 130.

⁵⁵⁸ While space and time limit a full analysis of the Buddhist (re)appropriation of Derrida’s *différance*, several sources help summarize the current research. Specifically, Jin Y. Park’s recent collection of essays, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, contains a number of analyses describing how *différance* might be useful to the Buddhist tradition. However, the collection is fairly dependent upon the earlier work of Robert Magliola; while there is

The *Diamond Sūtra*, an early Buddhist text, contains a conversation between the Buddha and his student Subhūti, where the student explains that

...the Tathagata did not realize any such dharma as ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’ Nor does the Tathagata teach such a dharma. And why? Because this dharma realized and taught by the Tathagata is incomprehensible and inexpressible and neither a dharma nor no dharma...⁵⁵⁹

The fundamental disconnect here rests with the attempt, however nuanced, to express that which is inexpressible. The patterns in such passages share the aforementioned sympathies with Derridean deconstruction; as Park rightly points out: “Hesitation, avoidance, and evasion seem inevitable in Derrida and his voluminous writings as much as in the Buddha’s discourse.”⁵⁶⁰

Douglas Berger calls attention to Robert Magliola’s early mention of *différance* being “fruitfully...aligned” with *śūnyatā* along with the criticism that later thinkers like David Loy and Harold Coward do not take the analysis far enough.⁵⁶¹ The error here, though, is that Magliola attempts to make the argument that “Nāgārjuna’s *śūnyatā* is Derrida’s *différance* and is the absolute negation which absolutely deconstructs but which constitutes directional trace.”⁵⁶² While he goes on to make this argument, the direct alignment of the two is simply contrary to both ideas. There are a number of recent attempts to examine Buddhist thinking in

nothing intrinsically errant with this, the influence of his work is questionable insofar as clarity is concerned. Magliola’s style seems to want to imitate or re-create Derrida’s circuitous and off-center style of writing; to be fair, his writing attempts to (auto)deconstruct in itself. Where an articulation of opinion might be clear in Magliola’s work, the lucidity – and consequently scholarly value – of his work is questionable. Magliola’s endnotes are especially useful for an early study in Derridean research in Buddhism.

⁵⁵⁹ Red Pine, trans. with commentary, *The Diamond Sutra* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), Section 7, pg. 6.

Jin Y. Park begins her essay, “Naming the Unnameable: Dependent Co-arising and *Différance*” with the same text (*The Diamond Sutra*), though with a different section. One of the oldest extant Buddhist texts, the paradigm of *différance* can be examined through the various nuances of language found in the text. Parks examines the *Diamond Sutra* as a springboard for an examination of a pivotal question: “What is the relationship between the name, truth, and reality? How does one get to ‘what I [the Buddha] teach’ without being trapped by the undeclarability of truth and the naming of that truth?” Jin Y. Park, “Naming the Unnameable: Dependent Co-arising and *Différance*,” in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2006), 7.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. 8. Derrida describes *différance* in terms of a “...movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving.” Derrida, *Positions*, 8.

⁵⁶¹ Douglas L. Berger, “Deconstruction, Aporia and Justice in Nāgārjuna’s Empty Ethics,” in *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought*, ed. Youru Wang (London: Routledge, 2007), 49.

⁵⁶² Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, 89.

terms of Derridean deconstruction, specifically through *différance*; they engage with differences in texts, constructions, etc., to point to what might be a limitless, endless deferring to other texts. This might be akin to what Gregory Jay identifies as “...not the value of one term or the other (literal vs. figurative, philosophy vs. literature, etc.), but the meaning of the difference between them...”⁵⁶³ This may be so; it is not the intention of this project to examine and appropriate such sources, but rather to hopefully draw out some of the more subtle nuances and methods for further analysis (or, in Derridean terms, deconstruction). It is important to bear in mind that *différance* “is” more of an attitude and a technique within Derridean deconstruction: “Deconstruction is a perpetually self-deconstructing movement that is inhabited by difference.”⁵⁶⁴ In a similar thread, time and space do not allow for a thoroughgoing Buddhist perspective of *différance* or a Derridean approach to Buddhist thinking.⁵⁶⁵ Rather, the intended project is to examine the tensions of *différance*, teasing out how these tensions might allow for further analysis of Buddhist emptiness. One of Derrida’s more illuminating, yet highly nuanced, stratagems is to call into question presence in language; one of the ways he does this is through *différance*.⁵⁶⁶ Derrida’s first use of *différance* shows an economy, a form of writing that perhaps references a bringing-together

⁵⁶³ Gregory S. Jay, “Values and Deconstructions: Derrida, Saussure, Marx,” *Cultural Critique*, University of Minnesota Press, no. 8 (Winter 1987-1988): 175.

⁵⁶⁴ Spivak, “Preface,” lxxviii.

⁵⁶⁵ In this methodological move, I purposely attempt a similar approach as Bredeson in his seminal essay, “On Dōgen and Derrida.” In his comparison of the two thinkers, he outlines very clearly from the outset: “I can state flat-out that there will be no attempt to take a ‘Buddhist perspective’ of Derrida or a ‘deconstructionist perspective’ of Dōgen...[the purpose is] to come to an accurate and well-balanced understanding of what Dōgen and Derrida are up to.” See Garrett Zantow Bredeson, “On Dōgen and Derrida,” *Philosophy East and West*, University of Hawai’i Press, vol. 58, no. 1 (1 January 2008): 60. This is a useful distinction, but it is questionable whether or not the avoidance of a “Buddhist perspective” or a “deconstructive perspective” is possible in a comparative analysis. While Bredeson gives an interesting analysis and comparison, he seems to come close to delving into specific perspectives; the purpose in citing his work here, though, rests with the attempt to give an outside, objective view of how two seemingly different thinkers might be compared.

⁵⁶⁶ Spivak’s commentary is helpful here: “...différance – being the structure (a structure never quite there, never by us perceived, itself deferred and different) of our psyche – is also the structure of ‘presence,’ a term itself under erasure. For différance, producing the differential structure of our hold on ‘presence,’ never produces presence as such.” Spivak, “Preface,” xliii.

of concepts, to elucidate how they are deferred, moved aside, scattered for other texts,⁵⁶⁷

other meanings:

The relationship between reason, madness, and death is an economy, a structure of deferral whose irreducible originality must be respected...It is more written than said, it is *economized*. The economy of this writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess.⁵⁶⁸

This early demonstration of profusion of meaning in language – the play of an “economic concept designating the production of differing / deferring”⁵⁶⁹ – begins to illustrate the lack of presence in language;⁵⁷⁰ the question for this project, specifically, is how *différance* is (re)economized in Buddhist emptiness in a way that expresses “deferred presence.”⁵⁷¹

Différance might be closer to what Buddhism terms a “skillful means,” a tool for examination, rather than a system itself. Thus, there is something linguistically corruptive⁵⁷² in Derrida’s distinction between difference and *différance*; the purpose of the below subsections is to clearly (de)lineate a few of those strands of linguistic corruption in ways that are profitable for a discussion of how Derrida’s *différance* helps elucidate interpretations of emptiness in Buddhism; to that end, what appears below are a few hermeneutic angles with

⁵⁶⁷ John Caputo sums this nuance clearly: “There never is anything simply outside of knowledge and economy, never a ‘simple, ineffable exteriority’ to the circle. The idea never is to simply step outside them rather, by virtue of the double injunction, to learn to move within and interrupt knowledge and economy, to loosen them up in order both to give beyond economy and to give economy its chance.” Caputo, “Love Among the Deconstructibles,” 46.

⁵⁶⁸ Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” 62. Italics original. Earlier in this essay, Derrida sets up the various implications of this claim through an analysis of Foucault’s reading of Descartes: “...demonstrate how the neutralization of the factual world is a neutralization (in the sense in which to neutralize is also to master, to reduce, to leave free in a straitjacket) of nonmeaning, the most subtle form of an act of force.” Ibid. 60.

⁵⁶⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 23.

⁵⁷⁰ Derrida goes on to demonstrate this throughout numerous texts; his first reference to *différance* is specifically stated here to set the context for later analysis. Thus, this is not the only reference to lack of presence in language, nor the most best-articulated; its “value,” insofar as this study is concerned, lies with its original contextualization. This is illustrated, for example, in his essay on *différance*: “The economic character of difference in no way implies that the deferred presence can always be recovered, that it simply amounts to an investment that only temporarily and without loss delays the presentation of presence, that is, the perception of gain or the gain of perception.” Derrida, “Difference,” 151.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Corruptive insofar as *différance* “is” “...an irreparable loss of presence, an irreversible wearing-down of energy, or indeed as a death instinct and a relation to the absolutely other that apparently breaks up any economy?” Ibid. 150.

which Derridean *différance* might contribute to a reading of emptiness in an early Buddhist text, the *Heart Sūtra*.

A. Middle Way(s) and *Différance*: An Economy of Language

The central problem examined here deals with Buddhist emptiness and how that might be “understood” with Derridean *différance*, and perhaps more telling, with difference(s) of emptiness. Fundamentally, the connecting piece is the approach of that which cannot be expressed, but might be attributable to an internal attitude of deferring and differing. The teaching of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition purposely defies definition, slips from intellectual grasping, and is not a “thing” with which language can even describe. Ellen Y. Zhang describes emptiness in her study of Ji Zang: “...*śūnyatā* is not a cognitive concept to referring to any reality, but simply a convenient / skillful device to teach one to free oneself from all clinging and attachments.”⁵⁷³ In much the same way, the Derridean distinction between difference and *différance* strives for this same philosophical root of resisting “thing-ness” in favor of a “skillful device.” This is why Zhang brings together this connection with Derridean deconstruction: “Derrida insists that *différance* is a ‘middle way’ of ‘middle voice,’ a space between limits and no-limits rather than a transcendental principle which could be theoretically articulated.”⁵⁷⁴ Jin Y. Park makes a similar connection with a caveat that the Buddhist Middle Way is not equivalent to Derrida’s “middle voice” because “[t]he Derridean ‘middle’ also designates the impossibility of drawing a clear-cut demarcation between conditions that the history of philosophy has defined as binary opposites and that our linguistic convention has separated into two opposite realms.”⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷³ Ellen Y. Zhang, “Ji Zang’s *Śūnyatā*-Speech: A Derridean *Dénégation* with Buddhist Negations,” in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2006), 112. Italics original. According to Zhang, Ji Zang lived between 549-623 and was “...the systemizer of the Sanlun School (or, the Three Treatises School) of Chinese Buddhism...” Ibid. 109.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. 117. Italics original.

⁵⁷⁵ Park, “Naming the Unnameable,” 12. Park makes an important caveat here in the history of philosophy. Though she argues persuasively that there should be a clear distinction between the Buddhist Middle Way and

Youxuan Wang, however, makes a careful distinction between Derrida's *différance* and the Buddhist tradition: that of the origin: "Even if we can understand that this notion of 'origin' is subject to the play of *différance*, Derrida is still describing this indeterminate origin as the 'well-spring', the 'virgin ground', and 'common root'...His deconstruction is motivated by an overwhelming desire to reach an origin of sorts."⁵⁷⁶ From the outset, we might provisionally understand a general connection between Buddhist emptiness and *différance*; whether that connection can be made firmly between the "middle-ness" of Derrida's expression of *différance* and the philosophy of the "Middle Way" in Buddhism is a point of debate not examined here. Instead, the concept of a middle language – in both Derrida and Buddhism – provides interesting analytical points of *contention*; the question is whether or not this middle language might be used in a study of emptiness.

B. Language and Experience

The functionality of the middle voice between language/concepts/paths cannot be easily articulated. Modern theorists like Toby Foshay help illuminate how particular Buddhist thinkers, in this case Nāgārjuna, bring together the centrality of emptiness with a "middle" concept like *différance*, suggesting that the non-dual nature of his thought shares similarity with Derrida's non-dual middle voice.⁵⁷⁷ Foshay goes on to connect experience

Derridean *différance*, the "impossibility of drawing a clear-cut demarcation between conditions" may be found in other strands of Buddhism; for example, it could be argued (following the argument of Toby Foshay below) that Nāgārjuna's project is to explain how the Middle Way functions specifically for this reason (to delineate between nihilism and reification). Thus, while not engaging in this specific argument and the subsequent caveats, it might be stated that Derrida says that *différance* "indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity. Derrida, "Difference," 130. It is also important to note here that, for Derrida, *différance* is more of an attitude than a specific context; while a Buddhist might integrate rational thinking into some kind of contextual "philosophy," Derrida purposely resists this move. To that end, it is important to bear in mind that *différance* should remain as a voice or an attitude, not as a comparative philosophy.

⁵⁷⁶ Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 199.

⁵⁷⁷ See Toby Avarad Foshay, "Denegation, Nonduality, and Language in Derrida and Dōgen," *Philosophy East and West*, University of Hawai'i Press, vol. 44, no. 3 (July 1994): 549-551. Foshay goes further to connect these ideas with Derrida's denegation: "Like the notion of *śūnyatā*, which declares its own provisional and inessential character, denegation asserts the self-dividedness of every articulation – not only its participation in two registers of significance, of the expressible and the inexpressible, of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* but also the self-negating or empty character of the relation, or intersection, or *symploke*, of these dimensions." Ibid. 554.

(understood through language as “...one of the activities common to all human beings...”⁵⁷⁸) with “...the exercise of language itself is surely a vivid instance of the paradoxical fullness and emptiness of our experience, of our representation of experience, and of our experience of representation.”⁵⁷⁹ Foshay here draws a necessary parallel between experience and emptiness with the limited construct of language.⁵⁸⁰ Further, Magliola describes Nāgārjuna’s thought with language more in line with deconstructive lexicon: “Nāgārjuna...has already shown that a carefully reasoned logocentrism leads to pure negative reference. One must conclude, then, that all happenings, being utterly dependent, must be empty (*śūnya*) of self-nature and empty of entitative transfer or continuance.”⁵⁸¹ What might be gained here is whether the Buddhist concept of emptiness, fundamentally understood as a no-thing that is grasped with experience, and less so with language, may be elucidated with difference/*différance*.

Insofar as Derrida is concerned, it might be helpful to highlight the role of “playfulness” in his writing style; this is linked to experience because it illustrates both a potentiality and limitation for the reader. This is linked specifically with a middle way of understanding language: “[i]n Derrida, we see the effort to develop indeterminate concepts that can no longer be enclosed in traditional oppositions, a preference for neither/nor, a playful and elusive style.”⁵⁸² Thus, an experience of emptiness may be deconstructed with *différance* in a way that is not only “playful and elusive” but also with the possibility that “[l]anguage turns against itself, and is inscribed with self-erasure, in order to negotiate the

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid. 555.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ He states this paradox as “...language cannot be seen as necessarily obscuring the truth of our nature. Everything depends on grasping language rightly.” Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, 115. Italics original.

⁵⁸² Youru Wang, “Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language: A Liminological Approach to the Interplay of Speech and Silence in Chan Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West*, University of Hawai’i Press, vol. 51, no. 1 (January 2001): 84.

limits of language.”⁵⁸³ A connection between Buddhist emptiness and *différance* might be the (near) impossibility of marking the experience of emptiness with language, but does this convey an impossibility or, rather, a (re)positioning of emptiness at the limits of language?⁵⁸⁴ Derrida’s *différance* helps draw this distinction out further because it “operates” at the limits of language with(out) hope of pushing beyond what is found in the corruption of language; *différance* forces a re-examination of terms as they apply to the experience of emptiness because “[o]nce enlightened, hence free from any fixation, one is then a master of using language, a master of playing on and around the limits of language.”⁵⁸⁵ Though there is a tinge of hope or expectation found in the Buddhist Middle Way(s) of enlightenment, such a position is not necessarily found in Derrida; rather, the endless deferring/differing to other texts, other meanings, elucidates a difference in hope(s) of language; at once language is used for the “(re)inscribing” of enlightenment through absence, loss. Is this hope for Derrida?⁵⁸⁶ Is it the “viens, oui, oui” that he appeals to in terms of the otherness of language? While there is no way to correlate Buddhist enlightenment, via emptiness, with Derridean “viens, oui,

⁵⁸³ Ibid. Wang’s recent work deals with “liminological” understandings of Derrida; his project is important and beneficial to understanding a connection between Derrida and Buddhism. His project may be summed as follows: “...the problematization of any absolute limits of language, insight into the mutual connection between the two sides of the limits of language, and linguistic twisting as play at the limits of language – are the major elements of a liminology of language as addressed by postmodern thinkers. Stemming from its Latin root, the term *liminology* puts much weight on the meaning of the threshold that connects, or makes a transition between, the two sides, rather than on the meaning of an absolute borderline.” Ibid. Italics original. What he proposes, a “liminological” understanding, is advantageous, but he may not have completely worked out this idea in his article. Like other studies dealing with the limits of language and expression, Wang highlights and discusses the logical impasse, but does not provide a fully-worked out way forward. This has excellent value, of course, in its own right, but the question of moving past / through / in this impasse is important.

⁵⁸⁴ Wang encounters a similar conclusion: “The Middle Way thus provides a solid ground for a Buddhist liminology of language. If language use was not necessary and inevitable, the Buddha would have remained silent forever.” Ibid. 89.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid. 93.

⁵⁸⁶ Derrida alludes to this: “After this laughter and dance, after this affirmation that is foreign to any dialectic, the question arises to as to the other side of nostalgia, which will call Heideggerian *hope*.” Derrida, “Différance,” 159. Italics original.

oui,” perhaps the strand of hope conveyed in the text is enough to draw out the differences at the limits of language.⁵⁸⁷

C. Difference(s) of Interpretation: The (non)Language of *Différance* and Emptiness

How, then, might Buddhist emptiness be understood as/with/in difference? This is something of an impasse in language when the experiential and liminological⁵⁸⁸ underpinnings of emptiness are examined with(in) Derridean terminology; what is at play here is nothing less than self-referential emptiness as it is applied (if that is even possible) to endless deferral and differing. As David Loy sums, “For Derrida, what is problematic is the relationship between name and concept; so it is not surprising that he concludes with an endless recirculation of concepts.”⁵⁸⁹ Thus, the entire question of language, in this case Buddhist language in reference to emptiness, becomes something of an impossibility. Instead, what might be drawn out is the limitation of language to conclusively demonstrate the deferral and difference of emptiness in a Buddhist context; however, this impasse might tease out other possible paths because “[o]nce the absolute, impassible demarcation between silence and speech is obscured, the path for playing on the borders of language is opened.”⁵⁹⁰

This linguistic impasse is reflective of the problem of using language to express emptiness; indeed, Buddhist commentators are quick to delineate the inability to convey emptiness as a “thing,” as a “concept.”⁵⁹¹ Rather, as Loy connects emptiness and *différance*

⁵⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Points...*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et. al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 65.

⁵⁸⁸ This term is borrowed from Youru Wang in “Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language.”

⁵⁸⁹ David Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 249. Derrida acknowledges this tension in grappling with Nietzsche: “It is out of the unfolding of this ‘same’ as *différance* that the sameness of difference and of repetition is presented in the eternal return.” Derrida, “*Différance*,” 149. Loy’s connection with Nietzsche is in direct reference to Derrida, but the further connection with Buddhism is less clear. Specifically, a Nietzschean “eternal return of the same” presupposes a different chronological context than that of Buddhist philosophy. Whether or not the indirect connection Loy is making here is articulate enough between the two philosophies is not entirely clear.

⁵⁹⁰ Wang, “Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language,” 92.

⁵⁹¹ For example, Loy comments: “The corresponding danger was that *śūnyatā* would itself become reappropriated into a metaphysics, so Nāgārjuna was careful to warn that *śūnyatā* was a heuristic, not a

to demonstrate that both are “deployed for tactical reasons but [are] denied any semantic or conceptual stability.”⁵⁹² The important note here, Loy says, is that both emptiness in a Buddhist context and Derridean *différance* are “permanently ‘under erasure,’” thus indicating the comparative value.⁵⁹³ Derridean “under erasure” might be provisionally understood as a response to Heidegger’s difference between being and nothingness; as Walter Brogan explains:

The *sous rature*, the erasure, is not an afterthought but belongs essentially to the original writing of Heidegger’s difference. It is genesis – the originary difference that is traced in this act that contradicts the origin even as it signifies it. It is the trace that differentiates while deferring its own difference. It is *différance* as Derrida portrays it.⁵⁹⁴

The important element here, erasure in terms of *différance* (to understand Derridean *différance* in its original contextual reaction against Heidegger in the larger western philosophical tradition), is useful to Buddhist emptiness as a critique because

Being means security, the grounding of the self, whether it is experiencing something transcendent or intellectually sublimated into a metaphysical *archē*. We want to meet God face to face, or see our essential Buddha-nature, but trace / *śūnyatā* means we never catch it. The sense-of-self wants to gain nirvāṇa / enlightenment, but trace / *śūnyatā* means it can never attain it.⁵⁹⁵

Hence, even though contextually-speaking, it may not seem reasonable to hold Buddhist emptiness with Derridean *différance*, the critiques of the metaphysics of presence through erasure, finds similarities in how both terms (if they can be called that) correspond to their

cognitive, notion.” Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” 234. Italics original. Herein is an important connection with the comments made above (see note 16); Loy rightly points out the slippery notion of emptiness. Just as *différance* is a heuristic, so is *śūnyatā*.

⁵⁹² Ibid. A further note of clarification is needed on Derrida’s use of “deployment” in relation to *différance*, specifically because it engages Heidegger’s understanding of “Being.” As Derrida comments, “...différance is, to be sure, but the historical and epochal *deployment* of Being or of the ontological difference. The *a* of difference marks the *movement* of this deployment.” Derrida, “Difference,” 153. Italics original.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Walter A. Brogan, “The Original Difference,” in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 36. Italics original.

⁵⁹⁵ Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” 238. Italics original. It might be asked here if Loy makes preliminary conclusions with the full force of his argument; in other words, are his connections too premature? Especially in his connection of Derridean trace and Buddhist *śūnyatā*, Loy seems to connect ideas in a way that is not fully fleshed out. While the trace and *archē* are certainly terms of great analytical worth, the connection here seems to be too premature.

original contexts: in Derridean *différance*, “[it] is undiscoverable but not because it holds itself back and remains concealed. *Différance* has no proper names or meaning to discover at all,”⁵⁹⁶ which bears striking similarity/difference with Buddhist emptiness: “We interpret *pratītya-samutpāda* [dependent origination] as *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is a guiding, not a cognitive, notion, presupposing the everyday.”⁵⁹⁷ Thus, in a way, both terms’ slippery avoidance of meaning, their difficulty in pinning-down, makes them paradoxical comparative differences.

Though we can delineate out and study *différance* and Buddhist emptiness, there is always the risk of reification, of definition, of thing-ness of which both terms resist.⁵⁹⁸ The fact that both “stand” outside of their respective traditions (as no-things, erased, traces), and yet thoroughly within the traditions, makes them deconstructive concepts; hence the risk of creating and sustaining a “master concept.” To that end, for *différance* and emptiness to have no-thing-ness, they must stand apart from a conception of “master concept.”⁵⁹⁹ Their meaning, though, is wrapped up in *erasure* – whether that is outright rejection of Being (in the Heideggerian sense) or the rejection of all thing-ness.

D. A Rejection of Master-Concepts: Erasure

The risk in isolating any particular word over another is developing a master-concept; both Derrida and Buddhist thinkers were well aware of this problem. The isolation of terms like *différance* and *śūnyatā* lend themselves to analytical master-conceptualization, whereby other ideas are imposed or withdrawn. In one sense, the terms do seem to stand alone insofar

⁵⁹⁶ Brogan, “The Original Difference,” 38. Italics original.

⁵⁹⁷ This is quoted by David Loy in his article “The Deconstruction of Buddhism.” It is from Nāgārjuna’s MMK, 12.8, 24.11, 18. Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” 233. Italics original.

⁵⁹⁸ Magliola helps clarify this: “The relation of the ‘present’ to the ‘past’ and ‘future’ is a negative relation, that is, the present is *not* the not-now. The relation, even if negative, is a sort of shadowy ‘time’s becoming spatial’ (spacing); but the relation becomes spatial only to self-differ, for the not-now, spatially and thus under erasure, is brought alongside the now only to differ from the now. And the now is nothing but the *not* not-now which is functioning in the (crossed-out) same space.” Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, 24. Italics original.

⁵⁹⁹ John Caputo calls *différance* “a quasi-transcendental anteriority, not a supereminent, transcendent ulteriority.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 3. This lends credence to the thinking that *différance* does not and could not act as a master-concept, as a term with which to hold over other terms. Rather, it is the “quasi-transcendental anteriority” which makes for an interesting discussion.

as they act as analytical “pieces” with which to grasp another concept, but this transforms the term/concept/trace into exactly what it “is” not.⁶⁰⁰ In other words, when *différance* and *śūnyatā* become master-concepts, they are able to “stand” on their own, to convey meaning outside of the text, or point to other meanings. By preventing *différance* and *śūnyatā* from “being” master-concepts, the fluidity of the trace, the remnant, the supplement can deconstruct with(in) a given meaning; as Kevin Hart highlights,

We can better appreciate the status and scope of ‘affirmative’ when we realize that what is affirmed in deconstruction is the non-coincidence of being and meaning. Derrida dubs this non-coincidence *différance*, and maintains that it precedes all grounds while resisting becoming another ground precisely because it forbids self-identity of any sort.⁶⁰¹

It is important to note the purposeful and indicative intention to “allow” the fluidity (and, consequently, no “ground”) of *différance* and *śūnyatā* insofar as they might help elucidate deconstruction within the Buddhist tradition. In this way, Derridean *différance* might express Buddhist emptiness as “...the effect of language that impels language to represent itself as expressive re-presentation, a translation on the outside of what is constituted inside.”⁶⁰²

Derrida’s language of *différance* is (re)presented in a way that prevents self-existence. Derrida describes this careful nuance: “What *différance*, the *trace*, and so on ‘mean’ – which hence *does not mean anything* – is ‘before’ the concept, the name, the word, ‘something’ that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of

⁶⁰⁰ Wang highlights the “...multiplicity of metaphors – trace, supplementary, circle etc. – in a rhetoric that acts out the motif of decentralization, or in an effect to prevent the idea of *différance* from becoming a master notion.” Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 209. Similarly, Spivak suggests that *différance* “comes close to becoming Derrida’s master-concept,” but that he ultimately resists this move. Spivak, “Preface,” xliii. Thus, it is important to note that although *différance* might be close to a master-concept, Derrida denies this within his own terminology; *différance* is also subject to deconstruction.

⁶⁰¹ Kevin Hart, “Jacques Derrida (b. 1930): Introduction,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1997), 161. The connection with Buddhist emptiness might be made here; used as a descriptor, but not a “thing,” emptiness, like *différance*, “precedes all grounds while resisting becoming another ground.” The Buddhist understanding of skillful means is useful here because it describes emptiness as a method of sorts while not ascribing it definitive being or existence.

⁶⁰² Derrida, *Positions*, 33. Here *différance* has implications for the Buddhist tradition insofar as Derrida critiques metaphysical language; he shows a way to critique from within the tradition. This means that though emptiness might seem *prima facie* a metaphysical concept, applying Derridean *différance* allows for a critique from within. The further implications of this are spelled out below.

the present, nor even from absence...”⁶⁰³ Here Derrida is grappling with Heidegger’s difference between Being and nothingness; he demonstrates that such clear difference is not possible; instead further dissemination (to borrow from Derrida’s lexicon) is necessary because Being cannot be confined to (or in) words, nor expressed with language. So, Derrida has effectively criticized the notion of presence in language; he must go further to avoid (or criticize from within) metaphysical language. Derrida uses erasure,⁶⁰⁴ or the marking through or crossing out of ~~words~~, allows him to “write” a term without the term “existing” on its own and without it “mean[ing] anything.”⁶⁰⁵ This is a careful move away from Heidegger’s crossing through as it is marked through with *différance*.⁶⁰⁶ Brogan identifies this move as a “radical shift and ... a move that Heidegger obviously struggled with but resisted.”⁶⁰⁷ More specifically, Derrida was responding to self-presence in Heidegger’s *Dasein*:⁶⁰⁸ “...if it is true that *différance* is not able to be named at all, it is especially true that it cannot be named *ontological* difference.”⁶⁰⁹ Brogan goes on to connect erasure with *différance*: “Derrida

⁶⁰³ Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 79. Italics original.

⁶⁰⁴ Though Derrida’s use of erasure is used widely in his literature, in this instance it is intended from his purposeful “crossing-out of the *archē* and the transformation of general semiology into a grammarology...” Derrida, “Differance,” 146. Italics original.

⁶⁰⁵ Derrida helps clarify this point: “We can expose only what, at a certain moment, can become *present*, manifest; what can be shown, presented as a present, a being-present in its truth, the truth of a present or the presence of a present. However, if difference ~~is~~ (I also cross out the ‘is’) what makes the presentation of being-present possible, it never presents itself as such.” Derrida, “Differance,” 134.

⁶⁰⁶ Caputo’s remarks are helpful here: “...[I]t would be a serious misunderstanding to think that *différance* is a master name, the secret, a hidden name of Being beyond Being, the hidden name of a presence so pure that it cannot appear and be present except by names of the imperfect traces of itself that it leaves behind as it withdraws from the world seated on a cloud of unknowing... *Différance* is not the trace left behind by the *deus absconditus* but the coded tracing within which are generated all names and concepts...” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 9. Italics original. Caputo’s description of *différance* is helpful because it highlights the point that insofar *différance* does not stand above other concepts, it is also subject to a play of differences itself.

⁶⁰⁷ Brogan, “The Original Difference,” 38.

⁶⁰⁸ Brogan unpacks this assertion carefully: “The sameness of *différance* and the ontological difference lies in their metaontological status. Both are radically other than anything that metaphysics could conceive or name in a discourse about difference. The difference between *différance* and ontological difference is that for Heidegger this otherness is an accessible otherness – an otherness with which *Dasein* dwells. *Dasein* is the being who can transcend the insurmountable gap which separates beings and Being. *Dasein* is the scene where this contradictory relation occurs. For Derrida, this contradiction needs to be radicalized and experienced as a contradiction.” Ibid. Italics original.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. Italics original.

crosses out the ontological difference. He does not in order to open up a new space but in order to operate freely in the clearing that has been given to him as a task for thinking.”⁶¹⁰ Derrida’s *différance* “does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present (*on*),”⁶¹¹ so, erasure is the “operative” move of *différance* insofar as it denies “being” in meaning, ontological necessity, and Being (in the Heideggerian sense⁶¹²). Derrida calls this a “strategy without finality...The concept of *play* (*jeu*) remains beyond this opposition; in the eve and aftermath of philosophy, it designates the unity of chance and necessity in an endless calculus.”⁶¹³ Through erasure, Derrida attempts to write without self-presence; how might this be applied to Buddhist emptiness? If emptiness cannot be adequately described, appropriated, etc., might Derridean *différance* allow for new ways of writing (about) emptiness?⁶¹⁴

Erasure allows *différance* to act with(in) *śūnyatā* to prevent either term from becoming a master-concept. By erasing the term, the supplement, the trace, emptiness is no longer expressible as a concept above/with/in others in Buddhism; in the same regard, erasure prevents it from being radically other from Buddhism. In the Derridean context, *śūnyatā* is both with(in)(out) its respective tradition, all the while resisting master-concept status.

III. Reading *Différance(s)* in Buddhist Emptiness

Buddhist thinkers have numerous ways of denoting emptiness, yet all are described as faulty, insufficient, and incomplete. At best, emptiness might be called a “pedagogical term

⁶¹⁰ Ibid. 38-39.

⁶¹¹ Derrida, “Differance,” 134. Italics original.

⁶¹² To clarify this very loaded phrasing, the intent deals with Derrida’s critique of the position of metaphysics: “This privilege is the ether of metaphysics, the very element of our thought insofar as it is caught up in the language of metaphysics. We can only de-limit such a closure today by evoking this import of presence, which Heidegger has shown to be the onto-theological determination of being.” Ibid. 147.

⁶¹³ Ibid. 135. Italics original. Caputo’s summary remarks of *différance* are helpful here: “...deconstruction, like negative theology, finds itself constantly writing under erasure, saying something without saying it, even deforming and misspelling it.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 2.

⁶¹⁴ This question is developed out of Spivak’s appropriation of *différance* insofar as “...being the structure (a structure never quite there, never by us perceived, itself deferred and different) of our psyche – is also the structure of ‘presence,’ a term itself under erasure.” Spivak, “Preface,” xliii. The connection is that by deferring and by a different emptiness, can emptiness “be” (re)thought of in a different way?

that points to the futility of any concept to accurately express the nature of reality.”⁶¹⁵ Writing the term emptiness does not convey the “true nature of reality...[as] empty of any abiding substantiality,”⁶¹⁶ nor does it convey self-presence or lack of self-presence. How might Derridean *différance* be useful in examining emptiness? Even Buddhist texts that assert that the true nature of emptiness is realizing that all is empty of “abiding substantiality” rely on methodological tools of expression to point to an origin of sorts: non-substantiality. In this way, *différance* might be useful because it “...is the nonfull, nonsimple ‘origin’; it is the structured and differing origin of differences.”⁶¹⁷ *Différance* may help write emptiness without conveying “substance.” More specifically, *différance* provides a way for inscription on/in this page in a way that transcends time and space because “...[Différance] retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element.”⁶¹⁸ Through *différance* Buddhist emptiness can be written as non-substantial, without occupying “space,” and without being a thing or (a) no-thing.

How might reading Derridean *différance* in/on/through Buddhist emptiness bring out new ways of thinking about emptiness? This question is examined below in a reading of an early text that deals specifically with emptiness: *The Heart Sūtra*.

A. Dissimilarities in *Différance*

While it might be shown that *différance* is “present” in a Buddhist text, perhaps to the point where definitive meaning is not possible, it is also important to note here some careful dissimilarities between Derridean *différance* and Buddhist emptiness. The *prima facie* observation here might be that while Buddhist emptiness is a foundational concept in Buddhist thought, *différance* is more akin to an *attitude*, a way of showing difference in a

⁶¹⁵ Judith Simmer-Brown, “Preface to the Vintage Spiritual Classics Edition,” in *Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, trans. and commentary Edward Conze (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), xix.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid. xviii.

⁶¹⁷ Derrida, “Différance,” 141.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. 142.

text. While *différance* is regarded as a “mark of...suspended status,”⁶¹⁹ Buddhist emptiness is more of a mark of “reality” as it points to the nonsubstantiality of thing-ness. In this way, Buddhist emptiness is a way of communicating the wrongly-assumed status of things, while *différance* is more of a tool to help unravel the binary oppositions that form the language of such things.

Though there is clear dissimilarity between *différance* and emptiness, *différance* is a purposeful step to separate out presence in language structures; indeed, to show their lack of presence, emptiness serves a similar function in Buddhist language. Emptiness is more like a realization, a step toward enlightenment where all things fall away, where language structures are not regarded as having presence, indeed that all phenomenal realities are empty themselves. The strength of using *différance* in a study on emptiness rests with the ability to deconstruct presence in language, to separate out binary oppositions within negative structures, and to show how emptiness, though empty “itself,” is still conditioned by *différance*.

IV. (Deconstruction[s] of/in/from) The *Heart Sūtra*

The *Heart Sūtra*, one the earliest extant texts arising out of the *prajñā* (wisdom) literature,⁶²⁰ is an excellent early source for discussing *sūnyatā* in the Buddhist tradition because it centers on “emptiness, the absolute nature of reality.”⁶²¹ While this may appear paradoxical, the focus is not so much on emptiness *as such*, but on “reality,” on the “self,” on the non-substantiality of all things. The *Heart Sūtra* is short, very dense, and requires an understanding of other Buddhist teachings; that is to say, a basic premise of the text is that the language employed has the ability to convey the non-substantiality of reality; or does it?

⁶¹⁹ Spivak, “Preface,” xliii.

⁶²⁰ Simmer-Brown follows Conze in situating the *Heart Sutra* as one of “the most renowned texts of the Indian Mahayana collection known as the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā* in Sanskrit).” Simmer-Brown, “Preface,” xv. What appears below is not a commentary on the entirety of the *Heart Sutra*, but a detailed analysis of sections that deal with emptiness explicitly.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

Herein lies the important step to examining the *Heart Sūtra* through the lens of Derridean deconstruction. When discussing such ubiquitous things like “reality,” “emptiness,” and “non-substantiality,” it is fair to assert that the text “exists” as a text today because it was important for early Buddhists to convey insight into the nature of reality. This also lends credence to the authority of the Buddhist texts upon community; even if language was limited in how it conveys the (non)meaning of emptiness in contradistinction to the experience of emptiness, it still asserts authority over the teaching of emptiness as a religious text; the authority lies in the claim that all phenomena are empty, including emptiness itself. However, early Buddhist thinkers were careful not to assume that their words conveyed presence (to borrow from Derrida’s phrasing of the problem) or (conversely) absence. Rather, it can be posited that the *Heart Sūtra* “exists” as a text in order to point the reader to his/her own (non-)substantiality, the text’s own (non-)substantiality, to letting go of craving for “existence.” To that end, would it be fair to call this *sūtra* a tool, a “skillful means” to use Buddhist phrasing, to expand upon the centrality of emptiness in the tradition? Perhaps, but this does not necessarily posit that either the ancient or modern reader possesses the “skillful means” with which to unpack the dense meanings and subtle nuances of the *sūtra*.

To identify the author-reader problem is but one piece of this examination. There are various other problems as well; for example, the text conveys the non-substantiality of emptiness while eliminating such terminology. Does the text (the ancient narrator, no less) go far enough? Is it possible to “grasp” the “meaning” of the text without craving, without ego, without substance (grammar, lexicon, syntax, etc.)? Might there be a different way to read the text? What is suggested here, and hopefully worked out below, is the possibility of (re)reading/(re)writing emptiness in the *Heart Sūtra* through the lens of Derridean *différance*. The examination – deconstruction – of such a text with *différance* does not pre-suppose meaning, nor does it pre-suppose the possibility of “understanding” with any kind of “plain

reading” of the text. Rather, deconstruction lays bare the other voices, the (non)substance of the text, the play of words, and, perhaps, a *différant* “meaning” of emptiness. There is no pre-tense of rewriting Buddhist emptiness, nor is there is the attempt to suggest a fundamental disconnect (though that may be part of the conclusion), but rather the teasing out of possibility.

As suggested above, Derrida’s possible answer to writing⁶²² emptiness without presence, as a no-thing, would be through erasure, through ~~emptiness~~. As confined to language, the term “emptiness” here is written with *différance* as “*différance* inhabits the very core of what appears to be immediate and present.”⁶²³ Thus, the project here is not so much to learn to “write” or “understand” emptiness so much as it is to bring out the nuances of having to write emptiness; to that end, is a “new” way of writing necessary? It is possible to “write,” or in Derridean terminology, inscribe, emptiness? Just as Derrida wrote out a “science of writing,”⁶²⁴ is not a grammarology of emptiness necessary? This would take seriously the possibility of (re)inscribing emptiness insofar as the grammarology is “a science that would study the effects of this *différance* which Western metaphysics has systematically repressed in its search for self-present truth.”⁶²⁵ While the connection between Western

⁶²² Barbara Johnson elucidates the distinction between writing and speech: “Writing...is considered by the logocentric system to be only a *representation* of speech, a secondary substitute designed for use only when speaking is impossible. Writing is thus a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer’s death. This inclusion of death, distance, and difference is thought to be a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, to open up to all forms of adulteration which immediacy would have prevented.” Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Dissemination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), ix. Italics original. The implication here is that Derrida’s distinction between logocentric thinking, as expressed in words, is immediately corrupted and incomplete; thus, emptiness, conveyed in language, must be (re)written with erasure to convey the displacement and corruption of the term.

⁶²³ Ibid. Italics original. Johnson’s further comment in this definition is important: “The illusion of the self-presence of meaning or of consciousness is thus produced by the repression of the differential structures from which they spring.” Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid. ix-x. While it may be alleged that this amounts to applying a criticism of Western metaphysics to Eastern thinking, the intention here is to show (through the below analysis of the *Heart Sutra*) how the same error may have been committed in Eastern thinking. Admittedly, there may not be a direct correlation here; instead, from the outset it might be alleged that the error was made in the form seeking self-present Truth through negations.

metaphysics and Buddhist emptiness is not inherently self-evident, the connection might be made with an analysis of how the language is used to substantiate the priority of emptiness. As emptiness is central to texts like the *Heart Sūtra*, and also to Buddhism in general, the implicit and explicit use of negations might be deemed as a search for self-present (self-absent) Truth. To that end, the (un)developing of a grammarology of emptiness through *différance* might help present a lens of emptiness that could be useful for analysis. As such, the grammarology of emptiness, informed by *différance*, becomes the writing of emptiness that is neither presence nor absence, both presence and absence, and (neither nor) presence or absence.⁶²⁶ The (un)development of a grammarology of emptiness sets up a tension in the text, a(n) (anti-)lens by which to view the negations of emptiness as neither present nor absent.

An analytical lens, however, is simply not sufficient on its own; rather, the lens must be informed by *différance*, by textual tension, by instability. This allows for an interaction, even a bridge, between the thought of Derrida and Buddhist *śūnyatā*. Methodologically, the progression follows a similar logic of Youxuan Wang: "...I want to submit Derrida's text to a play of *différance*, and argue that...we can also translate Derrida's post-modern project of deconstruction into the pre-modern Madhyamaka language without ending up equating one with the other."⁶²⁷ While Wang's examined texts differ from those herein, the methodology he presents is a logical delineation of differing principles (namely pre-modern Buddhism and post-modern Derridean thought); Wang examines both (non)systems of thought independently of one another and yet sets up a tension that allows for analysis and discussion.

⁶²⁶ The use of *différance* here employs the idea that "[d]ifference is not a 'concept' or 'idea' that is 'truer' than presence. It can only be a process of textual *work*, a strategy of *writing*." Ibid. xvi. Italics original.

⁶²⁷ Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 192.

The same methodological tactic is applied here, with the attempt to view the pre-modern *Heart Sūtra* with post-modern *différance*.⁶²⁸

A. Emptiness and Form: *Différance*(s) of the Self

*Here, O Sāriputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness.*⁶²⁹

The above passage, comprising several of the critical verses of the *Heart Sūtra*, demonstrates the nuance of Buddhist emptiness; however, though it is a key passage in the early wisdom literature, is it intelligible on this side of enlightenment?⁶³⁰ If the main motif here is the non-substantiality of all things, is it possible to convey this through writing? The above analysis of Derridean *différance* helps unpack this question further, as well as provide a way to write (about) emptiness.

1. (The) Text: Commentators

Edward Conze's discussion of the *Heart Sūtra* is quite helpful because he focuses heavily on the centrality of emptiness to the Buddhist tradition.⁶³¹ He expounds upon the idea that emptiness is the non-substantiality of all things, including the self: "As long as the self still struggles to extinguish itself in emptiness, it will set form against emptiness, and so

⁶²⁸ The *Heart Sūtra*, along with many other pieces of early Buddhist *prajñā* (wisdom) literature, is quite short in length; the accompanying commentaries, however, both ancient and contemporary, are quite lengthy. To that end, time and space limit a full discussion of nuances of emptiness in these commentaries; rather, what are examined are major points that help bring out the various nuances of emptiness for further examination.

⁶²⁹ Edward Conze, trans. and commentary, *Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 86.

⁶³⁰ Lopez helps contextualize this: "The Buddha neither abandons samsāra nor covets nirvāna, knowing both to be like a dream, equally empty. He abides in neither the cycle of rebirth or the nirvāna of the Hīnayāna, but in the unlocated (literally 'non-abiding') nirvāna that is the *summum bonum* of the Mahāyāna." Italics original. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 66.

⁶³¹ It must be noted, however, that closer examination of his work may show the limitation of his understanding; as Conze was an early translator of ancient Buddhist texts into English, this might be held in a specific context. Though his interpretation is certainly nuanced, it is oftentimes limited comparatively with other commentators. For example, Conze often appeals to explicitly Western philosophical terminology to explain Buddhism; while this may not be inherently "wrong," it betrays a rather limited understanding of traditions in their own right.

on.”⁶³² Here Conze highlights perhaps one of the more difficult nuances of emptiness: to see the world, objects, emotions, etc. as fundamentally empty is a difficult task, but to see the self, *yourself*, as fundamentally empty (of ego, substance, etc.), is immensely difficult; the self wants to cling to something, to (it)self, others, to identity, etc. The *Heart Sūtra* suggests that this should not be so difficult because *all* things are empty of substance; Donald Lopez, Jr. clarifies this subtlety: “...although emptiness is the mode of being of form, emptiness does not negate the conventional appearance of form. Thus, emptiness is form.”⁶³³ Furthermore, Conze cautions that not letting go of the self, seeing the self as fundamentally empty of substance, too, will lead to setting “form against emptiness, and so on.”⁶³⁴ What is at play here might be called “an affirming negative (*paryudāsapraṭiṣedha*)”⁶³⁵ because it requires a type of dialectical logic; the tension here is clear: one must see that all things lack independent substance, including the self; furthering the delusion of form and emptiness does not allow the dialectical tension to play out.

However, an interesting negation arises here; if “forms” are empty of substance,⁶³⁶ emptiness must, too, be empty of meaning, substantiality, etc. Fundamentally, all is negated – including the *Heart Sūtra*, with its short, yet pregnant, words, and its tension of form and emptiness. Even more, the negation employed to do so is also itself ~~negated~~ in this process.⁶³⁷ Does this reach the point of inexpressibility with words? Here Conze offers an interesting way forward: “But where self-extinction is accomplished, there a non-difference

⁶³² Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 89.

⁶³³ Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained*, 58.

⁶³⁴ Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 89.

⁶³⁵ Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained*, 60. Italics original.

⁶³⁶ Lopez helps clarify this statement: “...’form is emptiness’ can be taken to mean that the form of reality, which is emptiness, is empty of the thoroughly imagined form and designated form. ‘Emptiness is form’ means that the form of reality has the same final nature as the other kinds of form; they are all empty.” Ibid. 64.

⁶³⁷ Lopez offers helpful commentary here; he follows this logic to its natural conclusion: “But if it is not asserted that the wisdom of the non-duality of object and subject ultimately exists, why is it not non-existent? It is not; it is asserted to be dependently arisen conventionally and it has passed beyond being ultimately existent or non-existent. Existence is overcome.” Ibid. 71.

of world and emptiness will ensue.”⁶³⁸ Does this suggest a type of negative unification once the self is “extinguished”? What is the “non-difference” that Conze suggests? Conze examines the etymological roots of *śūnyatā* as the “absence of any kind of self.”⁶³⁹ Furthermore, he suggests that “...all dharmas are ‘empty’ in the sense that in their reality no ‘self’ can be found, nothing that owns, nothing that belongs.”⁶⁴⁰ Conze’s use of “non-difference,” though, carries different meaning: “[t]he emptiness which is envisaged here is not empty of that which it excludes, but it includes it, is identical with it, is full of it.”⁶⁴¹ The non-difference Conze is discussing allows the subtle nuance of emptiness and fullness within “the self” and within “the world.” The ancient commentator Triratnadāsa elucidates the impact of the tension between difference and non-difference:

Because there is no way in which form could be other than emptiness, that form having the character of the aggregates could be other in terms of emptiness. However, form is only emptiness; it does not differ from emptiness in the slightest, nor could it. This clearly indicates the disturbing quality of difference.⁶⁴²

These are intrinsically related to one of the key ideas of the *Heart Sūtra*: “form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form.”⁶⁴³

2. *Différences in / on the Text*

While the sort of non-difference Conze discusses in his commentary is an attempt to grapple with the nuances of emptiness (especially in a Western framework of thinking), it comes too close to asserting some sort of negative unity. Perhaps the lens of Derridean *différance* comes closer to expressing the subtleties of *śūnyatā* in regards to the (no)self.

⁶³⁸ Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 89.

⁶³⁹ Ibid. 85.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid. 85-86.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid. 91. Lopez fleshes this out a bit more clearly: “Form is a positive phenomenon and impermanent; emptiness is a negation and permanent in the sense that it not in constant flux.” Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained*, 72.

⁶⁴² Triratnadāsa, as quoted in Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained*, 77.

⁶⁴³ Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 86.

Steven Laycock outlines the difficulty of examining the concept of the self in Derridean language:

No matter how faithful, no matter how accurately descriptive it might be, reflective [*re*]presentation, could disclose *the self only* if it were possible to speak of consciousness it[*self*], consciousness *as such; only*, that is, if it presented the ‘self’ of [*self*-]consciousness; *only*, once again, if consciousness maintained an ontic/ontological and transtemporal integrity; *only* if it refrained from its perplexing habit of flinging itself centrifugally beyond itself, deferring its very being beyond ‘itself,’ of lodging itself in that which is it *is not*.⁶⁴⁴

This highlights, with a very purposeful Derridean shift of *différance*, the difficulty associated with pinning down definitive meaning of the self and self-consciousness; herein is a play with the slippery notion of consciousness and how might a “self” be defined. The similarities with Buddhism are striking: just as the self is rejected in Buddhism, *différance* also suggests that a definitive vantage-point, a bird’s eye view, an objective and detached narrator,⁶⁴⁵ is not possible (nor should it be assumed), thus calling into question the possibility of a self amongst others, a self detached from otherness, or a centrality to the human person.⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴⁴ Steven W. Laycock, “Self and Self Image,” in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2006), 211. All italics and brackets are original.

⁶⁴⁵ See especially Derrida’s critique in his essay, “The Attending Discourse.” Specifically, “[The Attending Discourse] unites the motif of *presence* (the presence, the pressing solicitude of the interlocutory voice that calls you “you,” thus invoking the presence of the reader-spectator who *attends* the spectacle or discourse while it is happening) with the motif of the *auxiliary* (a discourse of aid, of indefatigable attentiveness, or vigilant prevention, a kind of Platonic *boetheia* that supports with its speech – its present speech – the faltering and frightened infirmity of an *ekgonos*, a dispossessed son, a stray product, a seed exposed to all the violence of writing: you).” Derrida, *Dissemination*, 324-325. Italics original.

⁶⁴⁶ Derrida’s analysis of the self is conceptually important to his thought; it is not possible to make an adequate summation of his concept of the self here, rather, a highlight of his discussion is important to contextualize the tension between the self and presence: “Within its most general form, the mastery of presence acquires a sort of infinite assurance. The power of repetition that the *eidōs* and *ousia* made available seems to acquire an absolute independence. Ideality and substantiality relate to themselves, in the element of the *res cogitans*, by a movement of pure auto-affection. It calls itself infallible and if the axioms of *natural reason* give it certitude, overcome the provocation of the Evil Spirit, and prove the existence of God, it is because they constitute the very element of thought and of self-presence. Self-presence is not disturbed by the divine origin of these axioms...God is the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge.” Derrida, *Grammatology*, 97-98. Italics original. Here Derrida is critiquing the Western conception of the self, specifically in the thought of Descartes and Hegel; he demonstrates how the possibility of a self-present knowledge or entity is not possible (with the possible exception of what he terms “God”). This distinction is important to this discussion because Derrida’s demonstration calls into question the possibility of any self or knowledge of a self.

Rather, through emptiness – or “lack” – the self is negated.⁶⁴⁷ David Loy suggests that Derrida’s skepticism of a self is rooted in the idea of a “self-existing, Cartesian-like consciousness.”⁶⁴⁸ The skepticism seems to go further, though, perhaps even to the possibility of perspective – in this case, a detached, objective standpoint:

The basic difficulty is that insofar as I feel separate...I am insecure, for the ineluctable trace of nothingness in my fictitious (because not self-existing / self-present) sense-of-self is experienced as a sense-of-lack; in reaction, the sense-of-self becomes preoccupied with trying to become self-existing / self-present, in one or another symbolic fashion. The tragic irony is that the ways we attempt to do this cannot succeed, for the delusive sense-of-self can never expel the trace of lack that constitutes it; while in the most important sense we are already self-existing, insofar as the infinite set of differential traces that constitutes each of us is the whole net.⁶⁴⁹

The possibility of a whole, a unity, in this case of a sense of self or of the self, is called into question due to the ever-present delusion of sense-perception, ego, and “clinging.” This generally parallels with a Buddhist rejection of the self; Loy goes further to suggest that the connection with Derridean deconstruction is made with the natural “end” of the self: “The sense-of-self wants to gain nirvāna / enlightenment, but trace / *śūnyatā* means it can never attain it.”⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁷ In this way, emptiness might be negated in the same way as “...the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as, to take only a few examples, sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc.” Derrida, *Positions*, 9. Italics original. In this model, would emptiness/negation become another of Derrida’s “oppositional concepts” that are marked by *différance*? This may be, but not necessarily. If emptiness somehow means that which is negated (pure negation?), and it must be informed by *différance*, but it is a play of signifiers when emptiness is written – and written in a way that signifies the emptiness of all qualities – can it be another in a(n) (endless) list of “oppositional concepts”? The point here is not whether or not emptiness / negation are defined or deconstructed as such, but rather if they inform the discussion of how / when / why the self is negated in a play of *différences*. In this way, the self, understood through emptiness, becomes / is negated.

⁶⁴⁸ Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” 238.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid. Italics original. Loy offers the following to substantiate his analysis: “I think this touches on the enduring attraction of logocentrism and ontotheology, not just in the West but everywhere: Being means security, the grounding of the self, whether it is experiencing something transcendent or intellectually sublimated into a metaphysical *archē*. We want to meet God face to face, to see our essential Buddha-nature, but trace / *śūnyatā* means we can never catch it...The problem, again, is our desire for self-presence, emphasis here being as much on the self- as on the –presence.” Ibid. Italics original.

Derrida himself is quite critical of the Cartesian assurances of a/the self. In the context of bringing together the Buddhist critique of the “no-self” in terms of emptiness with the Derridean critiques of the self (as a quasi-product that is superimposed upon/in a text as a false sense of presence), the similarities are notable. Derridean *différance* displaces, sets aside, casts doubt upon a (present) self in the same way that Buddhist emptiness affirms the negation of the self in/through emptiness. The definable ego, the “I” of the subject / object relationship, becomes a dialectical nil in terms of *différance*.⁶⁵¹ Derrida’s uneasiness with an “I” appears throughout his work; one example appears in his essay, “The Attending Discourse:”

But who is it that is addressing you? Since it is not an “author,” a “narrator,” or a “deus ex machina,” it is an “I” that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience; an “I” that, a bit like “you,” attends (undergoes) its own incessant, violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery; an “I” that functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution, is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or “life,” but only, moving between life and death, reality and fiction, etc., a mere function or phantom.⁶⁵²

In a similar way, the ego, the “I,” the self, is undercut by the emptiness of all substances (or, in Buddhist terms, the teaching of *anatman*); indeed the path to emptiness is often described as the realization of the lack of an independent, substantial self.⁶⁵³

This is no simple connection, though – if that is even possible.⁶⁵⁴ Rather, it might be more rigorous to call this a diacritical point of departure as Derridean *différance* allows for

⁶⁵¹ Derrida’s commentary here is quite helpful to unpack this connection: “Nothing – no present and in-different being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*. This is why the *a* of *différance* also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation – in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a *being* – are always *deferred*.” Derrida, *Positions*, 28-29. Italics original.

⁶⁵² Derrida, *Dissemination*, 325.

⁶⁵³ This theme is prevalent throughout Buddhist literature, both ancient and modern. To establish extra-textual support for this position, the lack of an independent self can be found in the *Diamond Sutra*, another ancient text of wisdom literature: “Furthermore, Subhuti, self-identical (*sama*) is that dharma, and nothing is therein at variance (*vishama*). Therefore is it called ‘utmost, right (*samyak*) and perfect (*sam-*) enlightenment.’ Self-identical through the absence of a self, a being, a soul, or a person, the utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment is fully known as the totality of all the wholesome dharmas.” Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 61-62. Italics original.

the voice of dissent for a self-present “I” in both Western metaphysical criticisms and Buddhist rejections of a self in the paradigm of emptiness. The implications of this are more specific in terms of what this says about Buddhist emptiness within the (textual) confines of the *Heart Sūtra*. Namely, how might the (re)inscription of “form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form” be understood of the (present) reader? If there is no present self, are the words themselves not empty, devoid of inherent meaning, thoroughly “absent” as the inscription of meaning upon the text? The logical conclusion of this might be something of textual nihilism, but even that would imply textual misreading of Derrida’s point; rather, the absent self who is (not) reading this text might have to square with the possibility of not only empty words (non-substance in language and meaning), but also the possibility of real form within the text. Hence, the diacritical connection with Derrida: the impetus of conveying textual “meaning” through inscription upon this page betrays the emptiness of form and the form of emptiness. The “effective violence of disseminating writing”⁶⁵⁵ must take seriously the possibility of writing emptiness, (dis)seminating negation, through the prism of Derridean *différance*.

B. Negations of/in Language

*...in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: No mind-consciousness element; There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no nonattainment.*⁶⁵⁶

This series of negations, each progressing from the basic (self) sense perceptions through the mind and thought, to the negation of the “path,” present something of a

⁶⁵⁴ The idea here is not to draw simple connections, for they would be on the surface only. Rather, the point is to attempt to put together a paradigmatic nuance of similarity / dissimilarity that is informed by both emptiness and *différance*.

⁶⁵⁵ Derrida, *Positions*, 85.

⁶⁵⁶ Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*, 97.

“comprehensive”⁶⁵⁷ negation of possible self-substantial elements. At once (and quite paradoxically) destroying concepts of any type of unity, and yet negating to the point of some sort of (non)unity, these negations are not easily sorted out into separate entities. Indeed, the text goes so far as to negate the possibility of attaining enlightenment because there is no “path.” Does this mean that the path is no path? Or, is there something else at play here? Should the path be better described as a (non)path?

Though the progression of negations follows its own logic, it is no simple negation of substantive things; rather, it pushes closer to a (non)transcendent language, a negation of self-perceptions - internal stimuli - and a negation of external objects. Lopez explores the logic of the negations by citing the commentator Jñānamitra: “The extinction of ignorance up to and including the extinction of aging and death have the characteristic of purification, but because emptiness is without characteristic, it is not the extinction of ignorance up to and including the extinction of aging and death.”⁶⁵⁸ Furthermore, Lopez explains this as the fundamental point: “[...]emptiness] is not any of the various categories of conventional phenomena because it lacks their defining characteristics. Emptiness is thus seen as beyond definition and expression.”⁶⁵⁹ In this logic, the differences between subject and object become blurred, perhaps because those distinctions were never really “there.”⁶⁶⁰ In the same thread, differences between clinging to “things” and “non-things” (like a path, attainment, non-attainment, etc.) seem to fall away. What is left is, as alluded to above, a sort of negative

⁶⁵⁷ This is a loaded term with the intent to underscore the totality of the negations; Conze unpacks this: “Suffice it to say that the Emptiness which...contains all the manifold multiplicity of the world, is, as the One, as well empty of anything that has been counted as separate dharma, whether conditioned or unconditioned.” Ibid. 99. Lopez describes the negations as “twelve links of the chain of dependent arising [that] are often depicted as a circle, the beginning of which, ignorance, can only be discerned by a Buddha.” Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained*, 98.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. 100. Lopez explains further: “Emptiness is beyond names and designations and because form is emptiness, it is equally inexpressible.” Ibid. 101.

⁶⁶⁰ Lopez draws out Vajrapāṇi’s commentary to explain the nuances between subject and object: “Because Buddhas have no object of meditation and sentient beings have no object of awareness, the stains of objects of knowledge do not exist and the non-conceptual wisdom does not exist. Therefore, there is nothing to attain and nothing to be lost.” Ibid. 106.

unity, a ~~oneness~~ that is at once transcendent and negative. Lopez describes this with more specific language: "...by understanding the meaning of emptiness one's mind is freed from all obstruction and all reasons for fear."⁶⁶¹ The question is whether or not this can be conveyed with any kind of authenticity or accuracy with language. How does one describe a sort of negative transcendence, a pseudo-unity with negation, a realization of the path by the falling away of the path? Is this possible with/through/in conventional language? The premise here is that conventional language pre-supposes subject and object relationships – even if it claims quite the opposite – because grammar, syntax, and particular vocabulary are used to convey negativity through the negation of possible "clings."⁶⁶²

How might these negations be examined through a Derridean lens of *différance*?

Derrida's own contradistinction of *différance* helps sort through the various negations:

On the one hand, it [the verb *différer*] indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until "later" what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible.⁶⁶³

The central negations in the *Heart Sūtra* are distinct "entities" (understood as a skillful means) because they negate sense, path, and attainment. Here emptiness might be understood as a form of limited skillful means, as it "...is another name for dependent co-arising and the middle path that emphasizes the impossibility of exhausting the multilevel causations which we call existence."⁶⁶⁴ Through the negations in the text, differences between subject and

⁶⁶¹ Ibid. 106-107.

⁶⁶² To that end, however, one must consider if that is exactly the point. Perhaps the failure of the language is really a / the truth of the *Heart Sūtra*. This would suggest that the tradition wants to impress upon its readers that emptiness, enlightenment, nirvana, et. al. are not conveyable through words, even with an impressive list of negations. However, does this not also pre-suppose that there is a language beyond the language, that there is meaning behind or in front of the language used in the *Sūtra*? This may coalesce well with a tradition that advocated using skillful means to convey a deeper meaning even at the expense of more simple expression. While this is certainly a possibility, the analysis here sets the reading of the text against the logical implications of negation. It is beneficial to parse out other possible meanings of the text, though the intent is to examine it through the lens of Derridean deconstruction.

⁶⁶³ Derrida, "Différance," 129. Italics original.

⁶⁶⁴ Jin Y. Park, "General Introduction," in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2006), xiii.

object are highlighted where they are empty, i.e. there is no distinction. This, however, draws in the problem of textual meaning in relation to any real “power” or “effect” these negations might have.⁶⁶⁵ Rather, the negations might be closer to what Derrida describes as “...an effect of *différance*, as is the effect of language that impels language to represent itself as expressive re-presentation, a translation on the outside of what is constituted inside.”⁶⁶⁶ This might begin to highlight a fundamental difference between Derridean analysis and a Buddhist understanding of emptiness. What is re-presented on the outside here? A Buddhist might examine this text as a (non-)path of negations and he/she might say that the words themselves are empty of substance; while a Derridean analysis might not differ from that (calling attention to possible meaning(s) of words), the disconnect arises from potential “outcomes.” Whereas for the Buddhist text, what is re-presented is a series of negations that expose the emptiness of substantiality, the emptiness of causation, the emptiness of the path, in the Derridean analysis, what is re-presented is the trace, the endless deferral to other texts, the deference to other possible meaning(s).⁶⁶⁷

C. Experience and/of Emptiness: Negation(s)

A concept of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition would take seriously phenomenological considerations, though the phrasing as such might be a bit different.⁶⁶⁸ As

⁶⁶⁵ Derrida highlights such problems quite clearly: “In the extent to which what is called ‘meaning’ (to be ‘expressed’) is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textual referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly ‘simple term’ is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority.” Derrida, *Positions*, 33. Italics original. This takes the idea that the above passage in the *Heart Sūtra* does not stand by itself, but rather is part of an endless differing and deferring to other texts on emptiness; though negations inform the logic of the passage, a Derridean lens of *différance* casts doubt on whether or not these could have any effect in and of themselves. The efficacious nature of the negations, then, may not be “measurable” in effect insofar as they are but a trace of other differences.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Caputo speaks of *différance* in almost apocalyptic terms: “But do not expect *différance* to settle...disputes; *différance* has not come to bring peace but the two-edged sword of undecidability.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 14. This begins to bridge the gap in examining Buddhist emptiness with *différance* insofar as the (only) factor of “undecidability” endlessly defers and shows differences in emptiness. This also undercuts the meaning of negativity and how it figures into an examination of emptiness.

⁶⁶⁸ While a Buddhist might not use the term “phenomenological” – a thoroughly Western word – the concept is still very much entrenched in Buddhist thought. At its root, as an examination of first-person consciousness, a

discussed above, a Buddhist conception of the self, or a no-self, would play into consideration of a Buddhist phenomenology, further consideration must be made with an understanding of emptiness.⁶⁶⁹ Perhaps, though, there is no clear way to conduct such an analysis, for is it possible to apply a Western philosophical concept upon Buddhist thinking? Further, the point of this section is to come to terms with negativity in Derrida, specifically as it might apply (however directly or indirectly) with Buddhist emptiness. The real question here must be decided with the role of an *experience* of emptiness. In Buddhism, emptiness is no-thing, a non-entity, a non-concept, etc. Extant Buddhist literature, specifically with the *Heart Sūtra*, suggests that emptiness is best understood via experience. Indeed, references to emptiness suggest nullifying or negating sensory illusions to calm the mind. And yet, it is not possible to describe emptiness solely in terms of experience because the implications of negation / negating might be lost. So, to turn toward a phenomenological view of emptiness in Buddhism might mean to grapple with the relationship of negating and experience.

The question of experience persists: how might emptiness be “understood” any other way? Is Buddhist emptiness fundamentally devoid of even that of the experiential realm; does the discussion naturally bend toward a phenomenological discussion of (un)awareness and the “experience” of emptiness? Here an examination of Derridean critiques is of valuable import. Specifically, the *Heart Sūtra* suggests that emptiness cannot be comprehended, examined, experienced, so how does it (not) “exist” in the text? Is it, fundamentally, “...a desire to experience the impossible, to go where we cannot go...to cross these limits, to defy

phenomenological perspective in Buddhism might share some antecedents with Western concerns, but further analysis would suggest a fundamental difference in the concept of the self. As Buddhism rejects a concept of the self, a phenomenological lens would differ greatly from its Western counterpoints.

⁶⁶⁹ For an introduction in Buddhist phenomenology, see part one of Dan Lusthaus’ *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch’eng Wei-shih lun* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), or Noa Ronkin’s *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

the border patrol, to think the unthinkable”?⁶⁷⁰ Moreover, John Caputo says, “For Derrida, the experience of the impossible represents the least bad definition of deconstruction.”⁶⁷¹ As Buddhist emptiness presents the unending, unyielding problem of expression, whether it be for experience, examination, etc., the connection⁶⁷² with Derrida rests with his tool of *différance* in deconstruction as a lens to view the impossible: “For *the* impossible is indeed an ‘aporia’ – which means ‘no way to go’ – but in deconstruction aporias are made to be broken, not to drive us off the road.”⁶⁷³ Thus, for comparative purposes, it might be analytically conducive to describe Buddhist emptiness as an aporia of sorts, especially with the problem of experience.

A more (un)natural fit to view a phenomenological view of emptiness, at least as the Western tradition is concerned, might be through Derrida (though Derrida would most likely resist this move himself). Derrida is highly critical of phenomenological methods, though he expends much of his scholarly output and shaping of his own thinking in/on (especially) Husserlian phenomenology.⁶⁷⁴ However, an examination of Derrida’s criticisms of

⁶⁷⁰ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, “Introduction,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 3.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Wang begins to work this problem out: “It is not difficult to see that the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness was challenged by the same questions as those that Derrida has to answer...For instance, when Śāriputra hears about the *prajñāpāramitā* negation of the binary opposition between the signifier and signified, his immediate response is the question; how does the idea of the non-dual which is signless get beyond a personal level? By means of the non-existent, existent, or the combination of existent and non-existent dharmas? ... if all dharmas are empty how can language, which is an instance of dharma, be employed to communicate this doctrine?” Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 216. Italics original.

⁶⁷³ Caputo and Scanlon, “Introduction,” 3. Italics original. Caputo and Scanlon continue to unpack this statement, which gives important analytical resonances: “They are broken not by a bit of academic cleverness and theoretical adroitness but by a dream, a desire, and a deed...To the aporia of the impossible, where the way of knowledge has been blocked, there corresponds the imperative of *doing* the truth, *facere veritatem*, which is what deconstruction is all about.” Ibid. Italics original. Caputo and Scanlon do well to present a highly-nuanced working “definition” (loosely defined) of deconstruction, but even though they touch on different aspects of it, one is left wondering if they draw in their own desire for what deconstruction should be. In other words, it is fair to question if Caputo and Scanlon remain faithful to the *différential* aspect of deconstruction insofar as it defies (self-)definition. To that end, though, they do not commit an error upon Derrida’s voluminous “definitions” of deconstruction; they do, however, seek something of comprehensive meaning of deconstruction, something that Derrida himself might resist.

⁶⁷⁴ A key text in the discussion of Derrida’s long-standing criticism of phenomenology is *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Though this collection of essays also have Derrida’s response to particular charges and assertions, a primary text

phenomenology is not the intent here; rather, if Derrida is understood in his own context (i.e. the Western tradition), what might be said about his use of *negativity* in relation to his criticisms of phenomenology? Perhaps one of Derrida's most apt critiques using *différance* helps draw together the problem of expression of emptiness:

Since absolute self-presence in con-sciousness is the infinite *vocation* of full presence, the achievement of absolute knowledge is the end of the infinite, which could only be the unity of the concept, logos, and consciousness in the voice without *différance*. *The history of metaphysics therefore can be expressed as the unfolding of the structure or schema of an absolute will-to-hear-oneself-speak*. This history is closed when this infinite absolute appears to itself as its own death. *A voice without différence, a voice without writing, is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead.*⁶⁷⁵

The problem here deals with the absoluteness of “presence” in regards to expression; this demonstrates how a particular problem of expression in Buddhist emptiness (is there a lack-of-presence in the voidness of emptiness?) might be further elaborated with *différance* insofar as *emptiness must be expressed with différence*.⁶⁷⁶ Would something like emptiness be considered a metaphysical issue in Buddhist philosophy or phenomenology? Might the “nature” of its illusive description, unfixed meaning, and inability to be relayed with experience contribute to the thinking that it is a metaphysical “thing” along with other

containing Derrida's criticism of phenomenology may be found in the collection referenced above: *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. As Derrida grappled squarely with Western thinking, much else can be said about his use of negativity as it applies to phenomenology. Though that is not the point and purpose of this project, the highlighted connection between Derridean negativity and phenomenology might well be beneficial.

⁶⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The Supplement of Origin,” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 102. Long after the publication of this essay, Jean-Luc Marion made an interesting criticism of such surety in Derrida's work: “...never, it seems to us, does Derrida himself explain exactly what can and should be understood by this phrase [the ‘metaphysics of presence’]...Is ‘metaphysics’ always identified as and by presence, or can it also include absence? Is presence exactly equal to onto-theo-logy, does it extend beyond, and does it even admit of being defined? Surely the indeterminacy of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ characterizes it essentially (as essentially without essence), indeed provides support for it.” Jean-Luc Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-21. Wang gives a more sympathetic view of Derrida's criticisms: “Derrida is not the first philosopher in the West to have diagnosed the ills of the dominance of metaphysics. His originality, as he sees it, lies in his prescription for an exit out of metaphysics from within metaphysics.” Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 207.

⁶⁷⁶ Wang's analysis is important here: he reminds that “...Derrida is still concerned with theorising about the production of meaning, albeit empty. His deconstruction is motivated by an overwhelming desire to reach an origin of sorts.” Ibid. 199.

concepts in Buddhism?⁶⁷⁷ In western terms, it might be said that the metaphysics of Buddhist emptiness are grounded in presumed absence, but even this conveys a lack of presence, a nonpresence that is still grounded in definitions of what is/not present. However, there is something else here; there is a point where emptiness is understood with *différance* but is not conditioned by it as such. It transcends experience of emptiness because it is a foundational negativity, foundational because it informs other linguistic structures in Buddhism. This negativity helps separate out *différance* in experiences of Buddhist emptiness.

V. Conclusion: Negative Transcendence and Buddhist Emptiness

A foundational aspect of Buddhism, emptiness pre-figures heavily in the tradition's literature, including the early *Heart Sūtra*. However, there is something inaccessible, something still linguistically amiss in Buddhist emptiness. Language seems to fail when describing emptiness, other than perhaps to call it an *aporia*. Indeed, there is something "impossible" to describe when attempting to flesh out emptiness. The experience of emptiness is one route, but even it is impossible to describe without one having experienced it; philosophically, emptiness is useful to flesh out other concepts; even now, there is still something fleeting, moving, and conceptually-shifting about emptiness. The Buddhist description that emptiness exposes the non-substantiality of all things makes it a sort of meta-thing, a metaphysics of presence that is only described in absence. This is where Derridean deconstruction, specifically with *différance*, helps show how a foundational concept is not fixed, certain, and permanent. It might be said that *différance* helps (re)inscribe emptiness in a way that is more true to an experiential / philosophical meaning of non-substantiality. By

⁶⁷⁷ Naturally, the concern here, along with other places, might be the reading of Western concerns and philosophy upon Buddhist philosophy. The problem of emptiness as a metaphysic, though, might be evident in how Buddhism treats the concept in its texts. Specifically the concern is asserting emptiness as a meta-concept within Buddhism where that might not be "true" in the tradition. It is not feasible to take a complex, historical tradition like Buddhism and argue for a meta-analysis vis-à-vis emptiness; rather, the implication here is to examine briefly the effect of emptiness upon the tradition through negativity.

demonstrating that emptiness is “subject” to *différance*, the linguistic model of non-substantiality can be pushed closer to an *aporia*.

Buddhist emptiness does not stand on its own as a philosophical conceptualization, but rather always acts to show a quality of other things, the non-substantiality of things. Like *différance*, emptiness is dependent on other-ness insofar as it shows a quality of something else, but “is” not “itself.” This otherness is important to note because it shows how emptiness functions within the larger scope of Buddhism; it points to the nature of other things, the non-substantiality of all things. There is something transcendent to this otherness; but as *différance*, emptiness is a negation because it shows non-substantiality of other things. In conclusion, Buddhist emptiness might be described as a negative transcendence because it points to an otherness, absence, and loss of substantiality.

Chapter V

Christian Nothingness and Derridean *Khôra*

In the preceding chapter, Buddhist emptiness was examined through the deconstructive lens of Derridean *différance*. This lent interpretations that began to contextualize Buddhist emptiness within the possible scope of Derridean negativity. By establishing a specific context of Buddhist emptiness within the possibility of comparison with other traditions, this was set against the backdrop of Derridean negativity through *différance*. The tension between an analysis of Derridean negativity and Buddhist emptiness opens new possibilities for comparison, analysis, and critical reflection.

This chapter continues in this strain of thought; namely, the intention is to further elaborate on the possibility of comparison through an examination of Christian nothingness within the scope of Derridean negativity.⁶⁷⁸ While the Derridean deconstructive force of *différance* was employed in the preceding chapter, Derridean negativity is explored here with his (non)concept of *khôra*.⁶⁷⁹

Further comparison of the Christian and Buddhist tradition will be examined in the following chapter, as a method of Derridean negativity, cast in the deconstruction of *différance* and *khôra*, opens new interpretations and paths of comparison.⁶⁸⁰

I. Christianity and the Problem of Language: Considerations

As was an explicit problem with the analysis of Buddhist emptiness, the use of “sacred” scripture within the scope of a religious tradition is rife with problems. Binary

⁶⁷⁸ One of the more fruitful tensions within this very specific analysis is the relationship between Derrida’s deconstruction and negativity (apophatic) theology. This tension will be explored at length below, but it is worth highlighting from the outset the clear distinction between “negativity” in Derrida’s thought and Christian apophaticism; indeed, Derrida goes to great pains to distinguish his thought.

⁶⁷⁹ It is important to note that deconstructive terms are not synonymous with God, emptiness, etc. in that “*La différence* is not the God behind God, and deconstruction does not proceed by progressively denying inadequate predications of *différance*.” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, xviii. Italics original.

⁶⁸⁰ As noted above, Derrida is not specifically a religious thinker, but as Hart notes, “...we are not concerned with Derrida’s intentions and individual interests as with the mode of critique he practises and its import for discourse on God.” Ibid. 22-23.

oppositions of truth/falsity, the sacred/profane, orthodoxy/heterodoxy, et. al., are not easily wrapped up in the confines of linguistic explication. Indeed, Gavin Flood argues convincingly for an analysis of religious traditions "...which is questioned by postmodernity in which there is temporal rupture, resistance to closure, and an emphasis on ambivalence and hybridity, with things remaining obscure."⁶⁸¹ In his thesis, Flood offers a thoroughly Derridean interpretation (though he does not explicitly claim this) of the problem of language, difference, and the inability to pin down language to fixed meaning.⁶⁸² For example, Flood goes on to argue for "...a dialogical model [that] must also emphasize difference, particularity, and the non-closure of research. Such a model moves away from a postulated universalism and objectivism towards the sharpening of difference and clarification of discourse."⁶⁸³ What Flood does argue is for an understanding of particular religious language within a particular tradition; he rightly argues throughout that "dialogical" discourse is needed to field the problem of particularity. However, in the final analysis, some questions might be asked of Flood. He concludes that "[r]eligions take place within narratives that are constructed and reconstructed from particular perspectives, from particular positions of power, which a critical religious studies can decode."⁶⁸⁴ The problem here, at least as far as language is concerned, deals with the problem of figuring out what that "narrative" is within the tradition. While there is validity to Flood's conclusion, certainly with the push to move through phenomenology to a deeper understanding of the narratives

⁶⁸¹ Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 1. Flood continues: "While not abandoning the importance of reason and clarity, the book does with to absorb into the academic study of religion ideas of indeterminism, the situated nature of inquiry and its dialogical nature, and the importance of reflexive or metatheoretical discourse about religious studies." Ibid. 2.

⁶⁸² Flood's specific language dealing with this problem incorporates a thoroughly post-modern approach to metaphysical language: "The truth value of religious language that is metaphysical (and does not make empirical claims subjected to contradiction by strong counter-evidence) cannot be recognized by criteria of truth brought in from other discourse...Metaphysical truths proclaimed by a religious tradition are internal to the tradition and can be understood in terms of coherence within given frameworks and their significance within those frameworks." Ibid. 171.

⁶⁸³ Ibid. 8.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid. 235.

that drive religious traditions, the problem of language highlights the difficulty in access to a cornucopia of various competing narratives and voices within a religion. The “problem” with religious texts is the fundamental desire for totalization, for completeness, for finality.

Furthermore, does language provide the means by which to sort through these voices?

When deconstruction enters the picture, the possibilities become fruitful; an example of what this might look like (in terms of theology) is suggested by Hart:

The deconstruction of ontotheology therefore consists in the deconstruction of this tradition of hermeneutics, which is achieved by showing that it is impossible to totalize *écriture*. If we take *écriture* to signify “scripture” what we have, in sum, is the view that scripture performs the deconstruction of the metaphysical element within theology.⁶⁸⁵

Hart’s thesis is interesting here, too, because he links the condition of humanity, with the original sin of the “desire for unmediated knowledge” with “the mutability of all signs.”⁶⁸⁶

This means that all religious language structures are unsure, unsound, etc., for as Hart goes on to argue, “If we picture God according to His attributes – as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent – we are plainly imaging Him as a plenitude of presence, both ontologically and epistemologically. By dint of Adam’s sin, though, God is for us an *absent* presence...”⁶⁸⁷ The question here might be whether or not Hart’s appropriation of deconstruction in theology is adequate; Hart’s focus is (onto)theological in much the same strain of Derrida’s criticism of theology. However, Derrida’s deconstruction makes no differentiation between religious and non-religious texts, theological meaning (as such), or, more broadly, scripture and non-scripture. Deconstruction is present, even pre-“existent” within all language, no matter what type/genre/form. While Hart is not incorrect, the narrowness of his critique (to theological language) may prevent the full force of deconstruction with(in) all literature, including religious literature.

⁶⁸⁵ Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 60. Italics original.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid. 7. Italics original.

The problem remains: what is religious language? Furthermore, and more specifically for this chapter, what is Christian language?⁶⁸⁸ Within the scope of this project, the difficulties of expression in apophatic language have been explored somewhat above, though the general question of meaning remains. Framing this in a Derridean way, "...language is never able to be adequate to what it refers to beyond itself."⁶⁸⁹ In the question of apophaticism, Derrida responds to the claim that his thinking is a type of negative (onto)theology in his essay, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."⁶⁹⁰ He goes on to differentiate his work from apophaticism insofar as he applies the critique of "hyperessentiality" to negative theology.⁶⁹¹ This is addressed at length below, but it is worth noting at this point the internal tension between Derrida's negativity in deconstruction and negative theology; the two are simply not compatible in any kind of direct comparative sense. Rather, the case must be made with the larger picture of how negative language functions in religious traditions.⁶⁹² In this case, the examined texts below attempt to flesh out the concept of nothingness in Christian thought through Derridean negativity in *khôra*.

This project does not presuppose that nothingness will or can provide a clear explication into the problem of religious language in Christianity. However, the thinking here is that nothingness can provide a lens by which negative language might contribute to the larger picture of religious comparisons, for "...positive theology requires a supplement of negative theology in order to check that our discourse about God is, in fact, about God and

⁶⁸⁸ Time and space limit the discussion here. However, for a good introduction into the problems of religious language, see William P. Alston's recent article "Religious Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220-244.

⁶⁸⁹ Merold Westphal, "Continental Philosophy of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 489.

⁶⁹⁰ This essay appears in a number of works, including *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, 73-142.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid. 79.

⁶⁹² A useful model of negativity is put forth by Hart; his careful distinction is important here: "We can therefore distinguish between two sorts of supplement and, accordingly, two sorts of negativity: the phenomenal, which works within a restricted economy and thus within metaphysics; and the transcendental, which defines a general economy and which questions metaphysics...[they] are mutually dependent, so restricted negativity will always involve general negativity, and vice versa." Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 198. Italics original.

not just about human images of God.”⁶⁹³ What is explored is the possibility of negative language – negative in the sense of being prevented from the charge of hyperessentiality – and language in the sense that limitations of reference (i.e. sign and signification) are acknowledged and further developed.⁶⁹⁴ To this end, Derridean deconstruction provides a way forward through religious language, calling into question the firm foundations of sacred texts and orthodox voices. Negativity is explored to provide the means by which language functions with(in) the tradition.⁶⁹⁵

The topic here is vast and difficult to manage within the argument. While certain considerations are made for the functionality of language in the Christian tradition, examined specifically through Derrida’s *khôra*, the overall goal is explore language in a specific context. Derridean analysis allows specific insight into the tradition from the outside; deconstruction has no specific religious goal in sight. Rather, it applies to texts – all texts – but not religious texts specifically.⁶⁹⁶ Thus, the questions must be posed this way: does deconstruction allow for the examination of religious language without the error of bad faith? Does it allow for insight from an outside position? Is there an inside/outside relationship to religious language?⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹³ Ibid. 6.

⁶⁹⁴ Mark C. Taylor helps contextualize this: “Perhaps we are called by nothing, in the ‘name’ of a certain not, in order (if it is an order) not to speak and write ‘about’ nothing.” Mark C. Taylor, “nO nOt nO,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 167.

⁶⁹⁵ Taylor makes a distinction that is useful here: “‘The not beyond of language’ must be read in at least two conflicting ways at once: the not that *is* the beyond of language, and the not that *is not* beyond language, that is, the not-beyond of language.” Ibid. 185-186. Italics original.

⁶⁹⁶ Hart clarifies this well by identifying “...the three fundamental tenets of Derrida’s case: *all* texts resist totalisation; *no* text is absolutely free from a context or a centre; and *some* texts seem to totalize other texts.” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 42. Italics original.

⁶⁹⁷ Harold Coward makes an interesting argument that helps contextualize this: “Derrida’s much-quoted phrase *il n’ya a pas de hors-texte* (there is nothing outside the text) would suggest that whatever revelation takes place via the process of negation much somehow take place within language.” In other words, Derrida makes a serious attempt to not comment outside of the text, thus if revelation is to have religious meaning, it must be within language, not from outside of linguistic parameters. Harold Coward, “A Hindu Response to Derrida’s View of Negative Theology,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 206. Italics original.

What is beneficial about Derridean deconstruction is the pushing of the limit to an *aporia*. This is central to understanding the limits of religious language because they ultimately fail/succeed to point beyond itself; the *aporia* of religious language rests on this possibility. While this explored further in the conclusion, the line of thought is important to bear in mind as Christian nothingness is explored below.

II. A Beautiful Language: *Khôral* Negativity and Christian Apophaticism

A. *Khôra* and Christian Apophaticism

To briefly sum thus far, in order to draw together the various strands of thought above, it is necessary to discuss how Derridean negativity, understood in the context of *khôra*, lends itself to an analysis of how negative language informs Christian nothingness. Much time and space will be spent examining how Derridean *khôra* may contribute to a certain type of negativity. While negativity in Christianity (in the general sense) cannot be rightly summed here, an analysis of an apophatic thinker might demonstrate how nothingness is further (in)formed by negativity. In this particular context, apophatic Christian thought is pulled together with the thought of Meister Eckhart (below), as Derridean *khôra* deconstructs/auto-deconstructs within Eckhart's text. The point to an analysis of these various strata within the analysis is not to show a clear-cut negativity within one tradition, but rather to demonstrate how negativity is, essentially, a fissure in Christian theology;⁶⁹⁸ further, this will allow for comparison with another religious tradition in the final analysis.

⁶⁹⁸ Taylor's comments on *khôra* are useful here: "...Plato glimpses a different third that is resolutely nondialectical. He associates this third with the strange space or spacing of the *khôra*." Furthermore, Taylor's analysis helps contextualize the point of examining *khôra* in light of Christian theology and Derridean negativity: "Neither being nor nonbeing, the *khôra* involves a negativity that escapes both the positive and negative theological register. As such, the *khôra* is *atheological*." The undialectical neutrality is useful for means of a comparison because it allows for the splits and gaps to be authentically examined. It is also important to note that Taylor goes so far as to bring *khôra* together in a discussion of Derridean negativity and even draws in Eckhart as a specific reference, but he goes no further with it. So, while Taylor's analysis is useful, there is a certain limitation simply because he does not follow through in his comparison. Taylor, "nO nOt nO," 187-188. Italics original.

B. Negative Theology

The connections between Derridean thought and Christian apophatic theology are well-known and extensively documented;⁶⁹⁹ therefore, time will not be spent here documenting such connections other than as means of brief summary. Derrida's discussion of negative theology, variously defined in the general thought of thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysus, Eckhart, and others, also extends to what he "...designates [as] a certain form of language, with its *mise en scène*, its rhetorical, grammatical, and logical modes, its demonstrative procedures..."⁷⁰⁰ Derrida questions whether there can be "*one* negative theology, *the* negative theology?"⁷⁰¹ Curiously, Derrida's criticism of negative theology also turns into somewhat of a confession of why he "had to forbid [him]self to write in the register of 'negative theology,' because [he] was aware of this movement toward hyperessentiality, beyond Being."⁷⁰² Yet, Derrida must (as he does on other occasions) enter into the metaphysical argument (positing presence) to address his primary criticism of negative theology: hyperessentiality. To briefly summarize his criticism, Derrida argues that Christian apophatic thinkers, while they are willing to negate everything including God himself, always come back to some sort of conception, albeit negative, of God – even if this God is beyond God. Caputo contextualizes this well: "Negative theologies are always just detours on the way to even higher, more

⁶⁹⁹ The texts that most conspicuously discuss negative theology and Derridean deconstruction are discussed at length in this project elsewhere. For example, Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* is an excellent early exposition on negative theology and Derrida's thought; John Caputo makes extensive studies of this, especially in his *Prayers and Tears* and in his *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. An entire collection of studies dedicated to this theme can be found in Coward and Foshay's *Derrida and Negative Theology*. With what might be considered a "formal" response to his thought in relation to negative theology, see Derrida's article "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in the aforementioned collection.

⁷⁰⁰ Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 73. Italics original.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid. Italics original. It is important to note that Derrida is far more specific with his question in a footnote: "Who has ever assumed *the* project of the negative theology *as such*, reclaiming it in the singular under this name, without subjugating and subordinating it, without at least pluralizing it?" Ibid. 131. Note 1. Italics original. Hart also poses a similar proposition in his reading of negative theology: "Just as there is more than one deconstruction, so too there is more than one species of negative theology." Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, xxi.

⁷⁰² Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 79.

sublime affirmations.”⁷⁰³ For Derrida, this does not designate a truly negative language because the end “result” or conclusion is still God; rather, Derrida wants to go so far as to suggest that a negative theology must always be open, always “other,” and not a foregone conclusion from the outset.⁷⁰⁴ He goes about this with several methods, including erasure of being, whose conclusion might be “[t]he anguished experience of the Nothing discloses being. Here, the dimension of Being discloses the experience of God, who is not or whose Being is either the essence nor the foundation.”⁷⁰⁵ Derrida’s conclusion to this particular method is interesting because he calls especial attention to it: “Understand me: this is an erasure that would above all have nothing negative about it!”⁷⁰⁶ The point to Derrida’s discussion about negative theology is that it cannot pre-suppose an internal negative method; it must not choose a specific conclusion, a/the God with which negation will ultimately lead to or away from, or a specific locus within kataphatic theology.⁷⁰⁷

Rather than try to frame the entire context of negative theology as it applies to Derridean thought, it is more productive to tease out one area (amongst many) where Derridean deconstruction acts with/in negativity. This place, the no-place, of spacing “is” Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *khôra*. This no(thing) of spacing, gaps, and desert serves as a context by which an examination of an apophatic thinker, Meister Eckhart, might be examined.

⁷⁰³ John D. Caputo, “Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart” in *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1989), 25.

⁷⁰⁴ Morny Joy makes a careful argument that serves as a special caveat in how negative language is used in Derridean terms: “For [Derrida], behind the seeming disaffirmations of negative theology lurks an ontological telos, the ultimate deus ex machine who informs the whole undertaking. This absolute Nonpresence is indeed an instance of an anathema to Derrida – for it has all the earmarks of an originary presence.” Morny Joy, “Conclusion: Divine Reservations,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 261.

⁷⁰⁵ Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 127.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid. 129.

⁷⁰⁷ Hart makes a qualification that helps tease out the distinction here: “Just as ‘sign’ must be crossed out in the deconstruction of metaphysics, so too must ‘God’ in the deconstruction of positive theology... The negative theologian uses language under erasure...” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 202-203.

C. Neutrality and Derrida's *Khôra*

Commentators on Derridean deconstruction often frame the intent with loaded phrasing; for example, John Caputo borrows phrasing from Kierkegaard in calling aspects of deconstruction “*armed* neutrality” insofar as “Deconstruction throws a scare into our discourse, questions the too tall prestige of the towers of reference, of the self-importance of ‘meaning,’ but without simply destroying meaning and reference themselves.”⁷⁰⁸ This begs the question of whether or not ascribing neutrality, positivity, or negativity to deconstruction is a bit redundant; does this not assume that such “effects” upon the text are observable, quantifiable, and justifiable? Caputo argues for neutrality because deconstruction is “even-handedly antagonistic to all claims of existence or nonexistence” and it is “uniformly nasty about letting vocabularies establish their credentials and get set in place...”⁷⁰⁹

Due to the pre-originary effect of deconstruction with/in a text, it is simply not possible to assert neutrality in regards to deconstruction. However, while deconstruction might not be positive, negative, or neutral, it “inhabits” a fourth “place” in what is left in the margins, in an ever-moving and shifting textual meaning that can be described *in relation* to other qualifiers. This means that *khôra* is not neutral “itself,” but its relation to religion, religious claims, God, theology, etc. might well be neutral. This is argued below because *khôra* provides insight into apophatic theology as it is a neutral qualifier upon religious meaning. However, this is only in relation to religious studies because *khôra* cannot be described other than with “bastard logic.”

What is now needed is a detailed study of *khôra*, in its context in Platonic and Derridean thought. As will be argued below, *khôra* provides key insights into reading Meister Eckhart because it opens a/the (no)place of God with (no)thing.

⁷⁰⁸ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 14-15. Italics original.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid. 14. Specifically, Caputo is here discussing deconstruction in terms of *différance*. However, it may be argued that such an argument may be applied to other aspects of Derridean deconstruction. For additional discussion of this particular issue, see Caputo, “Mysticism and Transgression,” 24ff.

III. Plato's *Timaeus*: *Khōra*

A. Description of Plato's *Khōra* in the *Timaeus*

Plato's *Timaeus* is a complex and nuanced work that demands careful attention. Time and space do not permit a full discussion of the *Timaeus*; rather for purposes of analysis, the discussion will be limited to the very short section in the middle of the text (49a – 52d) where Plato discusses a “third” kind of existence, an uncreated “receptacle” that can only be grasped with “bastard reasoning.” Furthermore, while Plato's *khōra* is examined here, the intent is to understand how the later interpreter, Jacques Derrida, makes use of his term as a deconstructive lens.

In his cosmological account of existence, Plato's *khōra* (χώρα – variously translated as “place, room, space, etc.”⁷¹⁰) plays a pivotal role in the paradigm of “...the first thoroughgoing, exhaustive teleological analysis of all natural phenomena.”⁷¹¹ In contrast to the forms of earth and heavens, *khōra* remains indefinable, a “difficult and obscure kind of thing.”⁷¹² Plato's cosmological account is articulate, precise, and exacting, especially considering the age of the text.⁷¹³ This is why Plato's elaboration on this “third” thing, “which exists for ever and is indestructible, and which acts as the arena for everything that is subject to creation,” is unexpected, strange, and dialectically “form(s)”-less.⁷¹⁴ Furthermore, as Thomas Rickert elaborates, “There is no direct equivalency between ideal and *chōra*, or *chōra* and world, which is also a way of saying that there is no proper place for these

⁷¹⁰ Dana Miller, *The Third Kind in Plato's Timaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 20.

⁷¹¹ Andrew Gregory, “Introduction,” in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield, introduction and notes Andrew Gregory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix.

⁷¹² Plato, *Timeaus* and *Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield, introduction and notes Andrew Gregory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

⁷¹³ Miller notes, “...Plato's intuitions have leaped many centuries ahead of his time by collapsing the distinction between material and spatial extension, or by proposing a quasi-phenomenalist account of the physical world...” Miller, *The Third Kind in Plato's Timaeus*, 9.

⁷¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 45.

concepts.”⁷¹⁵ Plato is careful not to say too much about the void, nothingness, emptiness that “is” *khōra*, but rather points to the inadequacy of language in description, usage, and characterization.⁷¹⁶ He does go so far as to call *khōra* a “receptacle” which bears particular usage it(her)self. Plato uses descriptive language like “nurse” and “receptacle” to extrapolate how “...it only ever acts as the receptacle for everything, and it never comes to resemble in any way whatsoever any of the things that enter it.”⁷¹⁷ Rather than go on about its fundamentally empty nature, Plato uses the paradoxical language of *khōra* to link to creation vis-à-vis as a “mother.”⁷¹⁸ *Khōra*’s nature as a receptacle “of all kinds” means, for Plato, that “it must be *altogether* characterless.”⁷¹⁹ Interestingly, Plato indicates that *khōra* must be “grasped by a kind of bastard reasoning, without the support of sensation, and is hardly credible.”⁷²⁰ *Khōra* is separate of creation, of the forms, and therefore can only be comprehended differently than other forms.

IV. Derrida’s *Khôra*: The Other Otherness, or Reflections on a/the Third Kind

A. Derrida’s (Re)Reading of Plato: (An) Introduction

In the span of Derrida’s critical output, he spends a good amount of time reading Plato. Limiting remarks on Derrida’s reading and writing (up)on Plato, he is primarily concerned with Western metaphysics; Walter Brogan summarizes this well: “One reading of Plato that Derrida gives follows Plato’s suppression of writing and traces the effects of this

⁷¹⁵ Thomas Rickert, “Toward the Chōra: Kristeva, Derrida, and Ulmer on Emplaced Invention,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2007): 258.

⁷¹⁶ Plato’s elaboration on the language used to describe or characterize *khōra* might not be a critique of language itself; Plato’s use of language conveys some reliance upon meaning, though it is nuanced enough to suggest that he did not assume fixed meaning. Rather, his critique of language seems to stem from the inability to describe things that are unfixed themselves: “...we should never say ‘this’ water, but ‘something of this sort’, and the same goes for everything else that we indicate by means of expressions such as ‘that’ and ‘this’, under the impression that we’re designating some particular thing and that these things have the slightest stability. The point is that they run away rather than face expressions such as ‘that’ and ‘this’ and ‘just so’, and every form of speech that makes them out to be stable entities.” Plato, *Timaeus*, 41.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid. 42.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid. 43. Italics original.

⁷²⁰ Ibid. 45.

decision which produces the Platonic system of metaphysical oppositions and the effacement of an ‘originary’ or arche-writing in Plato’s texts.”⁷²¹ Of especial importance to Derrida’s treatment of Plato is this “third” kind that Plato describes as between the earth and the forms. What appeals to Derrida is this “provisional appearance” which “stems...from the constraints of rhetoric, even from some incapacity for naming.”⁷²² *Khôra* is neither positive nor negative in itself; indeed it can scarcely be named and it must be understood with “bastard” logic. What interests Derrida is how *khôra* functions within language where “[i]t oscillates between two types of oscillation: the double exclusion (*neither / nor*) and the participation (*both this and that*).”⁷²³ This type of “oscillation” has importance in how it functions within the complexities of the text; indeed, there is a sort of negative movement going on here.⁷²⁴ This helps the draw out the larger paradigm of Derridean analysis insofar as “no text is fixed, stable, and completely circumscribed by its predetermined standpoint.”⁷²⁵ The function of *khôra* within a particular text – the “oscillation” of meaning – helps further illuminate the nature of Derridean textual deconstruction because “Writing, like the madness of *eros*, is dangerous, seductive, and ambivalent...”⁷²⁶

John Caputo’s description helps frame the (con)text of *khôra* as “Like pure being, or pure nothingness; both and neither...[it] is just the sort of thing, or non-thing, to attract the interest of Derrida’s ‘exorbitant method.’”⁷²⁷ Indeed, Derrida is interested in how *khôra*

⁷²¹ Walter Brogan, “Plato’s *Pharmakon*: Between Two Repetitions,” in *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1989), 7.

⁷²² Jacques Derrida, “*Khôra*” in *On the Name*, trans. Ian McLeod, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 89. As a side note, this translation of Derrida places the macron above the “o” on *khôra*, where other texts place a circumflex above the “o.” When quoting directly from this edition of *On the Name*, the macron is used, but elsewhere it appears with the circumflex because texts outside of *On the Name* use the circumflex.

⁷²³ Ibid. 91. Italics original.

⁷²⁴ Caputo describes *khôra* as “...a good *atheological* word, as opposed to the theological name, the name of God, whose singularity comes of being marked by the unheard trace which calls us into language.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 37. Italics original.

⁷²⁵ Brogan, “Plato’s *Pharmakon*,” 12.

⁷²⁶ Ibid. 16. Italics original.

⁷²⁷ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 85. Caputo’s comment of Derrida’s “exorbitant method” is meant as a sharp criticism of Derrida’s critics. The subject heading for that portion outlines why Derrida’s methodology of

functions in Plato's text, how the shifting language of this "oscillation" "'is' the anachrony within being, or better: the anachrony of being. It anachronizes being."⁷²⁸ The interesting note here is the shift in the text – whether the text of Plato or the text of Derrida, the effect is the same – between space and time, since *khôra* has neither being nor non-being, but there is a type of negative play going on in the text.⁷²⁹

What Derrida finds to be compelling in the deconstruction of Plato's *khôra* is the absolute resistance of firm description; he goes so far as to say that even though "interpretations" might be "inscribed 'on' her...she is not reducible to them."⁷³⁰ This is interesting as it presents something of a comparison with other Derridean terms that defy definitive "(in/de)scription," like *différance*, trace, *pharmakon*, etc.⁷³¹ Putting the question of description aside, Derrida wants to situate *khôra* in the "schema" of Platonic cosmology.⁷³² This is where Derrida situates *khôra* in a textual paradigm that lends itself to further consideration where oppositions of text and interpretation might occur; Derrida's questions are worth quoting at length:

...won't the discourse on *khôra* have opened, between the sensible and the intelligible, belonging neither to one nor to the other, hence neither to the

deconstruction is akin to very close reading, not some sort of textual or philosophical nihilism: "Deconstruction" will consist in a fine-grained reading of the text, of the literality and textuality of the text, slowly, scrupulously, seriously, in releasing the still-stirring forces that 'philosophy' and logocentrism strive to contain." Ibid. 83.

⁷²⁸ Derrida, *On the Name*, 94.

⁷²⁹ In many places in his commentary on *khôra*, his writing has distinct resonances with Heidegger's understanding of being. Robyn Horner carefully examines how Derrida's distinction "...that while *khôra* is not anything ("not a being of or of the present"), it is also not the Heideggerian Nothing." Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 236. Italics original. The concern here, however, appears to reside with "being" as it applies to textuality. Derrida explains this at length: "However, if *khôra* indeed presents certain attributes of the word as proper name, isn't that only via its apparent reference to some uniqueness...the referent or this reference does not exist. It does not have characteristics of an existent, by which we mean an existent that would be receivable in the *ontologic*, that is, those of an intelligible or sensible existent. There is *khôra* but *the khôra* does not exist." Ibid. 97. Italics original.

⁷³⁰ Ibid. 99.

⁷³¹ Caputo takes this further than Derrida; he wants to subscribe a positive correlation between Derridean deconstruction(s) within the scope of certain terms. This is addressed below in a short discussion of the possible correlation between *khôra* and *différance*.

⁷³² See Ibid. 102. He poses this question that guides the discussion thus far: "if *khôra* has no meaning or essence, if she is not a philosopheme and if, nevertheless, she is neither the object nor the form of a fable of a mythic type, where can she be situated in this schema?"

cosmos as sensible god nor to the intelligible god, an apparently empty space – even though it is not doubt not *emptiness*? Didn't it name a gaping opening, an abyss or a chasm? ... Let us not be too hasty about bringing this chasm named *khôra* close to that chaos which also opens the yawning gulf of the abyss.⁷³³

Here Derrida is mitigating the seemingly contradictory terms of “being nothing” (i.e. emptiness) and the truly otherness of *khôra* as an abyss of meaning. Dawne McCance interprets this negative maneuver as “...attempting to describe some supreme and unnamable entity.”⁷³⁴ Derrida's situating within the “schema” of Plato's cosmology is important to the inter-textual function of *khôra* because it is a stop-gap of meaning – and at the same time it is a receptacle of all meaning – but it defies “being.”⁷³⁵ It would appear that *khôra* functions within the text as not only a bridge between being and non-being, but also as an “abyss” of (non)meaning.⁷³⁶

Derrida is careful in his situating of *khôra* to not overstep his own criticisms, especially with reference to making claims about how Plato's textual *khôra* might relate to something outside of the text.⁷³⁷ To that end, Derrida goes to great pains to situate *khôra* in the middle of Plato's text, as “a chasm in the middle of the book, a sort of abyss ‘in’ which there is an attempt to think or say this abysmal chasm which would be *khôra*, the opening of a place ‘in’ which everything would, at the same time, come to take *place* and *be*

⁷³³ Ibid. 103. Italics original.

⁷³⁴ McCance, *Derrida on Religion*, 29.

⁷³⁵ In an interesting exchange between Derrida and his former student, Jean-Luc Marion, Marion proposes something of a criticism of trying to think through *khôra* because of its (lack of) being: “We all try to make sense out of those phenomena – the gift, the *khôra*, the other, the flesh and others that we cannot describe either as an object or as being. So, my hypothesis as a phenomenologist is that we should not try to constitute them, but accept them – in any sense of accept – as given and that is all.” Richard Kearney, moderator, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 71. Italics original.

⁷³⁶ Derrida says that this “...would perhaps not only be the abyss between the sensible and the intelligible, between being and nothingness, between being and the lesser being, nor even perhaps being and the existent, nor yet between *logos* and *muthos*, but between all these couples and another which would not even be *their* other.” Derrida, *On the Name*, 104. Italics original.

⁷³⁷ Christopher Norris makes some very useful and poignant comments regarding the thought behind writing and its necessary consequence. Here he is commenting specifically on Plato's “dubious honour of preserving his teacher's wisdom.” “[Deconstructive reading] will involve a certain violence to the text, but a violence that comes not so much from ‘outside’ – from a reading bent upon its own perverse design – but rather from the text itself, in those strains and contortions of sense that characterize its language.” Norris, *Derrida*, 34-35.

reflected...”⁷³⁸ Derrida finds the most inter-textual play here because the abyss is both limited to and reflected in/on the text;⁷³⁹ the interplay is indicative of “...the place of inscription of *all that is marked on the world*.”⁷⁴⁰ While Derrida does not venture to comment outside of the text, he does go on to suggest a framework in which *khôra* can be understood to function within the text as “already be[ing] occupied, invested, even as a general place, and even when it is distinguished from everything that takes place in it.”⁷⁴¹ This internal tension⁷⁴² of placing continues on in Derrida’s inter-text(uality)⁷⁴³ of Plato as he grapples with the “myth within the myth, of an open abyss in the general myth.”⁷⁴⁴ It is not, however, until Derrida plays out these tensions of the function of myth within the text that he is able to separate out being and non-being, coming to some kind of pre-conclusion that *khôra* functions between them.⁷⁴⁵ This function, between being and non-being, prevents objectivity in the text, “...nothing but receptacles of narrative receptacles...”⁷⁴⁶

⁷³⁸ Derrida, *On the Name*, 104. Italics original. Here Derrida seems to avoid the wording of “reflecting,” although he doesn’t altogether neglect the language-play. Rather, his emphasis seems to be elsewhere, perhaps outside of the text. Caputo touches upon this: “For that *khôra* is an ‘abyss,’ a void of empty space; it is also an infinite play of reflections in which the paradigms produce their images, simply ‘reflecting’ sensible things like a mirror that is not altered by the images it reflects.” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 86. Italics original. In a fair assessment, Derrida is standing on the limits of thought here, so his language of the “reflection” might be rightly understood as an inter-textual concern; however, the problem arises with how his language wants to contextualize the locus of *khôra* as thorough-going emptiness.

⁷³⁹ Derrida calls this “A logic whose authority was imposed on Plato...this limit appears in the abyss itself: the being-programme of the programme, its structure of pre-inscription and of typographic prescriptions forms the explicit theme of the discourse *en abyme* on *khôra*.” Derrida, *On the Name*, 106. Italics original.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid. Italics original.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid. 109. It is hard to overestimate how careful Derrida is with the “placing” of *khôra*. As he goes on to demonstrate with the example of Socrates, Derrida suggest that “Socrates is not *khôra*, but he would look a bit like it / her if it / she were someone or something. In any case, he puts himself in its / her place, which is not just a place among others, but perhaps *place itself*, the irreplaceable place.” Ibid. 111. Italics original.

⁷⁴² McCance’s description fills out what is meant here: “...*khôra* figures the place of bifurcation or opening, an ‘abyss’ between the sensible and the intelligible, between being and nothingness.” McCance, *Derrida on Religion*, 31. Italics original.

⁷⁴³ Caputo rightly mitigates the tension between / in the text here: “The text is always a bastard. This system or boxes inside boxes, containers containing containers – this “*khôra*” quality – is a feature of textuality itself.” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 91.

⁷⁴⁴ Derrida, *On the Name*, 113.

⁷⁴⁵ Derrida does not explicitly say that, but he alludes to it: “...in giving to be thought that which belongs neither to sensory being nor to intelligible being, nothing to becoming nor to eternity, the discourse on *khôra* is no longer a discourse on being...” Ibid. Italics original.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid. 117.

This middle place, non-objectifiable, between being and non-being, presents a fascinating place in textual analysis: “the text is neutralized in it, numbered, self-destructed, or dissimulated: unequally, partially, provisionally.”⁷⁴⁷ From here, Derrida elaborates upon the “textual drift”⁷⁴⁸ at play, where *khôra* is “orphan[ed]...it is distinguished from the philosophical *logos*.”⁷⁴⁹ This distinguishing is very important because *khôra* is set apart from the finality, definability, and closed-nature of the *logos*;⁷⁵⁰ hence, *khôra* is completely other, completely “adrift,”⁷⁵¹ and completely on its own.⁷⁵² This is the very specific benefit of Derrida’s analysis of *khôra*: with a complete setting-apart of the definitive *logos*, “being” adrift in pre-creation, engendering nothing(ness), *khôra*(l) studies affect that which is both adrift in the text⁷⁵³ and that which escapes a fixed nature and meaning: “She/it eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, and all truth. Preoriginary, *before* and outside of all generation, she no longer has the meaning of a past, of a present that is past.”⁷⁵⁴ Derrida firmly delineates how *khôra* is outside of the parameters of philosophy,⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid. 121.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid. 123.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid. 124. Italics original.

⁷⁵⁰ Caputo elaborates carefully – and playfully – upon the meaning of *khôra* in relation to philosophy: “So much “khôral” play, so many “khôral”-ographies, so many stagings, enactments, imagings, and reflections of *khôra* in the text before it becomes a philosopheme.” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 89.

⁷⁵¹ This terminology is borrowed from Caputo who references *khôra* in terms of “drifting” in multiple places. For example, see *ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁵² Derrida uses many terms to demonstrate the relation between time and space affect the notion of *khôra*. This is worth noting because “*Khôra* marks a place apart, the spacing which keeps a dissymmetrical relation to all that which, “in herself,” beside or in addition to herself, seems to make a couple with her. In the couple outside of the couple, this strange mother who gives place without engendering can no longer be considered an origin.” Ibid. Italics original. Derrida is very forthright in his analysis to considered time and space and its (un)relation to *khôra* because he is establishing how *khôra* is definitively separate of the *logos*, of that which is confined to time and space.

⁷⁵³ Caputo defines this very aspect as “a *saving* element in Derrida’s thought...precisely because it blocks the way to fixing or determining in some unrevisable way what is given. *Khôra* forces us to make our way by faith, construing shadowy figures which may turn out to be otherwise, beginning where we are in the midst of a web of institutions, structures, languages, and traditions.” John D. Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 217. Italics original.

⁷⁵⁴ Derrida, *On the Name*, 124-125. Italics original. Derrida goes on to suggest further implications of this claim: “We must go back toward a preorigin which deprives us of this assurance and requires at the same time an impure philosophical discourse, threatened, bastard, hybrid. These traits are not negative. They do not discredit a discourse which would simply be interior to philosophy, for if it is admittedly not true, merely probable, it still tells what is necessary on the subject of necessity.” Ibid. 126.

of conventional thought, so that “in order to think *khôra*, it is necessary to go back to a beginning that is older than the beginning, namely, the birth of the cosmos...”⁷⁵⁶

What emerges from a discussion of Derrida’s treatment of *khôra* is what Rickert calls “inventing the impossible.”⁷⁵⁷ Rickert goes on to draw the parallel: “Derrida’s *chôra* inhabits an impossible place, one that governs, in a manner nearly meta-metaphysical (in the sense that the *chôra* comments on the limits of metaphysics), the entire proceedings, to the extent the project remains unfulfilled.”⁷⁵⁸ Rickert’s analysis is correct here insofar as Derrida’s project, whether it is rightly or wrongly called “meta-metaphysical” criticism, reaches into the impossible; does that make Derrida an “inventor” of the impossible or an “inventor” within the process/projection of the (im)possible?

B. Caputo’s Familial Construct of *Différance* and *Khôra*: Relatable?

John D. Caputo is an adept and long-standing commentator on the work of Derrida, especially in the realm of Derrida’s thought as it relates to religious studies and, more specifically, apophatic theology. He makes a long and sustained argument for something of a synthesis, not necessarily by definition, but by concept, for a direct and special relationship between Derridean *différance* and *khôra*. This relationship is elaborated throughout numerous places in Caputo’s work, with differing levels of intensity. A careful parsing of this relationship, however, exposes where Caputo’s analysis falls short; while he is careful to avoid directly equating the two (non)concepts, he does not differentiate between the inherent tension in the text.

⁷⁵⁵ John Caputo helps clarify this point: “For *khôra* exposes a certain ‘impurity’ ...and intractability at the very core of philosophical concepts, a certain retreat and recession from philosophy’s grasp, right there in Plato, who is the very paradigm of what we mean by philosophy, thus leading us up to the very limits of philosophy...” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 75.

⁷⁵⁶ Derrida, *On the Name*, 126.

⁷⁵⁷ Rickert, “Toward the Chôra,” 266. It is important to note that Caputo, too, uses similar language when discussing Derrida’s project throughout his *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid. Italics original.

Caputo makes his case very explicitly in his response paper, “Apostles of the Impossible,” when says, “*Khôra*, Derrida says elsewhere, is a kind of surname for *différance*, a kind of scriptorium for the inevitable inscriptions which constitute our institutions and structures, beliefs and practices, texts and deeds.”⁷⁵⁹ While Caputo cannot be faulted for reading this in/on to the text, Derrida does *not* make this connection explicitly. Rather, Derrida says, “This necessity (*khôra* is its sur-name) seems so virginal that it does not even have the figure of a virgin any longer.”⁷⁶⁰ Elsewhere, Caputo is less explicit with this claim: “God is ineffable the way Plato’s *agathon* is ineffable, beyond being, whereas *différance* is like the atheological ineffability of Plato’s *khôra*, beneath being.”⁷⁶¹ While the logic of this assertion may be defended as a connection, Derrida is simply more elusive than to bring together the two in definitive comparison.

Caputo makes the strongest case for this comparison when drawing the two together under the premise of negative theology:

...to what extent does negative theology succeed in making itself safe from *khôra*, within which it, negative theology – any theology, any discourse – would be inscribed? For what is emerging (*donner lieu*) or taking place (*avoir lieu*) in *khôra* is the “spacing” or the “interval” within which things find their place, “the very spacing of de-construction,” which makes *khôra* sound like an apophatic name, a surname, for *différance*. What else is the desert *khôra* for Derrida than a nameless name for the desert of *différance*, of the trace, which is the constant companion of apophaticism?⁷⁶²

This is a strong case, indeed, but it does not find its absolute textual reference in Derrida’s work. Caputo is more forthcoming with the logic that precedes this argument when he

⁷⁵⁹ Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible,” 217. Italics original. In this text, Caputo sites Derrida’s “*Khôra*” on page 95, and *On the Name* on page 126 as textual evidence for this connection.

⁷⁶⁰ Derrida, *On the Name*, 126. To further contextualize this comment, Derrida defines “this necessity” as “...toward a *necessity* which is neither generative nor engendered and which carries philosophy, ‘precedes’ (prior to the time that passes or eternal time before history) and ‘receives’ the effect, here the image of oppositions (intelligible and sensible): philosophy.” Ibid. Italics original. So, while Derrida gives similar context here as he does to *différance*, why does he not simply use this terminology to explain the point?

⁷⁶¹ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 10. Italics original. Again, in his citation of Derrida’s essay, Caputo cannot be faulted necessarily for reading this into the text, especially as Derrida deconstructs the binary oppositions possibly ascribed to *khôra*.

⁷⁶² Ibid. 39-40. Italics original.

explains, “Everything in deconstruction is inscribed with *différance*, woven from its elemental spacing, inscribed in a differential matrix, caught up in an inescapable condition that is older than time and wider than space.”⁷⁶³ Caputo makes the most sustained case for this relationship in his short text on deconstruction.⁷⁶⁴ Here Caputo argues vigorously for the idea that “...the story of *khôra* works like an ‘allegory’ of *différance*, each addressing a common, kindred non-essence, impropriety, and namelessness.”⁷⁶⁵ Caputo goes on to argue for this connection with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how *différance* functions in Derridean texts. For example, he says, “That is why Derrida will also speak of *différance* as an *archi*-writing, which is reflected here when he calls the *khôra* a ‘pre-origin.’”⁷⁶⁶

What Derrida does with *khôra* is situate it firmly within deconstruction (arguing that deconstruction is already at play in Plato’s *Timaeus*) as spacing between nothingness and being. This “situating” is difficult, mainly because it must be grasped with “bastard reasoning.” Derrida’s situating of *khôra* firmly in a deconstructive matrix is, perhaps, why Caputo associates it so closely with *différance*. Derrida does not mince words here: “The spacing of *khôra* introduces a dissociation or a difference in the proper meaning that it renders possible, thereby compelling tropic detours which are no longer rhetorical figures.”⁷⁶⁷ It is this textual difference which, perhaps, is why Caputo so explicitly brings together Derridean *khôra* and *différance* as (non)characteristically similar (so similar, in fact, that familial relationships are deployed). It is possible to be sympathetic to this position, especially with the textual metaphor of describing *khôra* as absolute desert of meaning, and

⁷⁶³ Caputo, “Love Among the Deconstructibles,” 37-38.

⁷⁶⁴ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 96-105, “Différance: *Khôra* Is Its Surname.”

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid. 97. Italics original. Caputo follows this with similar logic used in previous sources: “*Différance*, like *khôra*, is a great receptacle upon which every constituted trace or mark is imprinted, ‘older,’ prior, preoriginary.” Ibid. Italics original.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid. 102. Italics original.

⁷⁶⁷ Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 106.

thus achieving the same deconstruction perhaps through its own *différential* re-inscription. However, it is more authentic to view this type of pre-originary concept as being in tension, not as “sur-names,” because this comparison, albeit familial relationships (“sur-names”) or mediated deconstructive (non)concepts, presupposes that Derridean deconstruction is possible with the various (non)concepts that define how binary oppositions fall apart in a text.

At numerous points, Derrida goes to great pains to demonstrate how deconstruction is already at work in a given text – any text – and how various deconstructive elements are already in/at play, including indeterminate spacing between nothingness and being, i.e. *khôra*, and oppositional (binary) meanings within a given text, i.e. *différance*.⁷⁶⁸ Caputo is absolutely right to bring *khôra* and *différance* together because they deconstruct, perhaps even auto-deconstruct (in the full force of Derrida’s meaning), a given text from within/out; he also rightly brings out the significance of “[d]ifférance...[as] the nameless name of this open-ended, uncontainable, generalizable play of traces. And *khôra* is its surname.”⁷⁶⁹ However, the error is to bring them into such close, familial relation (and an innocuously “positive” relationship) because there is an internal tension at play here, too. *Khôra* and *différance* are not exclusive terms, definable and controllably deployable; rather, they are at the very best (non)contextualization(s) of deconstruction. Deployable, perhaps, but not controllable; this sort of wild, free play within the text lends an excellent analytical tension within the framework of understanding *khôra* and *différance* as parasitic, in much the same way that deconstruction is parasitic. *Khôra* and *différance* do not “exist” in any sort of sense within/out the text, and certainly not outside of the text (as Derrida warns extensively). They must “exist” as parasites, showing the free play of meaning, contextualization, etc. within a/the particular situation of a text. But they are in tension with one another, not in familial

⁷⁶⁸ It is readily acknowledged here that the “definitions” given here are approximations given for the purposes of contextualizing, but not strictly defining, *khôra* and *différance*. Any kind of fixed meaning is rejected, but for purposes of comparing and contrasting, broad strokes are given in the above analysis.

⁷⁶⁹ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 105.

relation, for where *différance* shows this type of pre-originary play which can only be seen through a trace, or a trace of a trace, *khôra* exposes the groundlessness of meaning, the abyss (i.e. endless) of open-endedness. The two (non)concepts almost play *off and on* each other in their parasitic forms, for they do not “speak” themselves, but in a paradoxically way, they allow a text to “speak” in its own pre-linguistic terms, namely under erasure.

It is this distinction that allows *khôra* and *différance* to “function” differently and with a situational abyss within the texts here. This distinction, as both a relationship that Caputo describes in almost positive terms that, coupled with negative tension, allows deconstruction to be exposed within a given text.

C. *Khôral* Negativity: (Re)Opening Religious Texts

Derrida’s deconstruction of Plato’s *khôra* lends itself to a discussion of how negativity might affect texts in a general sense; to some extent this is explored above, specifically in the discussion on how Plato’s *khôra* stands as an abyss in the text, as free and uncontrollable play within the text. However, what emerges from this is the possibility that *khôra* is not a “thing” that can be measured in tangible effect upon a text; in other words, *khôra* is not a conventional parasite that tears through a medium; rather, *khôral* play is already at stake in the text, as a (no)thing that is “pre-originary.” This means that a *khôral* effect is not some nihilistic, freeform criticism that strips bear meaning from a text. Instead, what the above discussion of *khôra* suggests is a localized effect upon a text – any text – and how it “drifts” into the (non?)realm of the impossible.

While it might be beneficial to go further in a general sense, for as Derrida argues, *khôra* is pre-originary and adrift in every text, the purpose here is to narrow the field somewhat to religious texts. The context set herein has to do with Christian texts specifically, and even more narrow than that, apophatic texts. So, several questions are at play here, simultaneously. What is the effect of *khôra* upon negative theology? Is *khôra* a

neutral “actress” in apophaticism, or is “she” at play in all negative theological texts? How might *khôra* be appropriated to reading texts by a specific thinker, such as Meister Eckhart, who demonstrates an internal deconstruction already? While these questions are general in nature, the purpose is to contextualize how an examination of negativity in Christian apophatic texts lends itself to internal *khôral* play.

The idea that there might be something always “lost” and “adrift”⁷⁷⁰ in religious texts most likely would not sit well with adherents to a particular faith. Indeed, the non-being at play here, *khôra*, has more or less “forced” her/itself between being and nothingness as “Plato [was]...forced by the things themselves to include *khôra* within his account – he cannot ‘not speak’ of it – yet he does not know how to ‘not speak’ of it, that is, to respect its negativity.”⁷⁷¹ Indeed, commentators (notwithstanding Derrida) have struggled to write *khôraly* as there is something lost and adrift in commentaries as well. However, the point can be taken that to write *khôraly* is to write with this “third thing” that defies meaning, that requires “bastard logic,” that is continually adrift. Does this mean *khôra* is her/itself negative? Not necessarily, though numerous commentators have taken this particular to task; the intention here is not to explore those possibilities explicitly, but rather to examine possible *khôral* readings of a text. Specifically, the analysis below takes a specific text of Meister Eckhart and examines it through the lens of deconstructive *khôra*; possibilities of negativity are worked out from there because the full “force” of what *khôra* might mean in terms of negativity are relative to particular locations within texts.

Returning momentarily to a more general discussion of the possibility of a religious deconstruction of its own texts, the possibilities herein are fruitful and ripe for discussion. Derrida is not a religious thinker *per se*, but the nature of his work touches upon religious

⁷⁷⁰ These terms are borrowed from John Caputo. See his section on *khôra* in Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 92ff.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid. 95.

considerations, arguably, throughout the corpus of his work. Derrida spends a relatively large amount of creative energy upon several religious topics, especially as they apply to textual analysis; one of the more relevant articles here is his “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” where he squarely deals with the question of apophatic theology.⁷⁷² Here too, John Caputo contextualizes the *possibilities* of Derridean thought for religious thought; specifically, he is addressing the idea of deconstruction in religious texts:

...Derrida points out a similar thing about the construction of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which does emblematic service as an indicator of the heavily textualized nature of what we call the ‘sacred scriptures.’ That raises various problems for a theory of ‘revelation,’ and not only for fundamentalists, which cannot be a matter of taking dictation from a divine speaker. The same thing is true of any text, ancient or modern, sacred or profane, which would always be structured, ‘constructed’ of layer upon layer, fold upon fold, ply upon ply, so that to read a ‘text’ is always to un-fold, de-construct, what is going on.⁷⁷³

What Caputo does here is set the stage for a de-construction of religious texts, but curiously he only goes as far as Derrida; indeed, as much as Caputo describes what this might look like (perhaps lending itself to the thoroughly Derridean concept of the impossible, what is to come...), he does not take the research in that direction. The thinking here is not so much that a “fulfillment” of such a task is necessary, desirable, or even possible, but that it could lend itself to even more possibility (as always, to come). This is not so much setting a stage as it is examining how “[s]o much ‘*khôral*’ play, so many ‘*khôral*’-ographies, so many stagings, enactments, imagings, and reflections of *khôra* in the text before it becomes a philosopheme” can take religious texts – herein an apophatic text of Eckhart – to show the possibility of play in a religious text.⁷⁷⁴

It is worth noting here the distinction between using “sacred” and other, perhaps better labeled “spiritual” texts. The texts of Eckhart are not considered sacred in the

⁷⁷² Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 73-142.

⁷⁷³ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 88.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid. 89.

Christian church (indeed, quite the opposite in some cases, as his texts gathered official Church condemnation), but might be considered “spiritual” or of at least “religious” significance. In the same way that Derrida himself considers *khôra*, at best, in tension with negative theology, the tension from this religious text opens for fruitful discussion, namely because all language is informed by *khôra*, even religious language.⁷⁷⁵ The implication here is that even if *khôra* cannot be domesticated by religion or a religious text, it still “occupies” a “place” that is pre-originary to the language of religions. This is different than deconstructing what would be considered a sacred text, like the Bible, but the theological significance can be gathered either way. This means that while Eckhart’s text is not sacred within the religious tradition, the topics he covers have sacred significance. Thus, while it is not proposed that a “sacred deconstruction” of sorts is taking place here, the spirit of such an analysis might be considered appropriate. To that end, it is also possible to consider the overall effect of *khôra* upon a religious text.

D. *Khôra* and Spacing: Comparisons with(in) a Text

In order for there to be (non?)lens of *khôra* to be analyzed in a given text, as appears below, a more specific “task” of deconstruction (understood loosely here as analysis of layers upon layers of texts) is necessary. What appears to be one of the more relevant aspects of a *khôral* analysis is the possibility of spacing in/on a text. From here, the context of religion might be better understood in negativity; specifically, here, the use of the word “without” between two “religious” terms spells out a type of negation (e.g. “faith without faith”).

Caputo frames this well:

The effect of deconstruction is not to undo a specifically religious faith but to resituate it with the trace and thereby to let faith be faith, not knowledge or triumphalism. Deconstruction can have no brief against faith, because

⁷⁷⁵ McCance, *Derrida on Religion*, 30.

deconstruction is *itself* faith, miming and repeating the structure of faith in a faith without dogma.⁷⁷⁶

The use of the term “without” deserves careful parsing because it is pregnant with possibility. Here it functions as a type of negativity; it is immediately negating the preceding term in a way that contextualizes the second term. Thus, when Caputo describes Derridean deconstruction a type of “faith without dogma” the *khôral* analysis must consider how the second term is reshaped by the “without.” The immediate “effect” (if it can be described as such) is a type of freedom of the term, a re-shaping, resituating of *both* terms. Here “without dogma” reshapes “faith” in a way that opens it (*khôrally*?) to new interpretations, new contexts, and a new “faith.” This is why Caputo’s later reading of Derrida is so relevant:

Such respect [of the “other”] would be *religio* as a respectful reserve before the *tout autre*, the religion of the an-khôra-ite, that would perhaps relieve the violence by which the concrete messianisms are consumed. The return of this religion would spell the end of religion’s ever-recurring wars, of religion’s return with a vengeance, of religion as a recurrent cycle of revenge.⁷⁷⁷

The possibilities here are important with respect to negativity within the context of emptiness because this outlines how Derridean deconstruction, through the endless drift of *khôra*, might show how “religion” can be re-contextualized: “For this desert, *khôral* religion does not necessarily involve God, and while it certainly involves faith, faith is not necessarily faith in the God of the great monotheisms.”⁷⁷⁸ While not suggesting a *religion without religion* as such, Caputo does read Derrida in such a way as to suggest a way forward, albeit *khôrally*. This is exactly the point: *khôral* analysis of a religious text, read with spaces, the abyss, endless drift, and the infirm ground of the trace, lends itself to going behind religion, a prior-to religion, a pre-originary religious understanding. This is no mere re-situating, but an

⁷⁷⁶ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 57. Italics original.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid. 156. Italics original. Preceding this argument, Caputo provides the following interpretation: “*Khôra* is the stuff of new tolerance, not of familiar Christian or Enlightenment tolerance, which are disguised ways of keeping the ‘same’ in place, but of a tolerance that ‘would respect the distance of the infinite alterity of singularity.’” Ibid. Italics original.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid. 157.

“archaeology” of sorts (to read Derrida (up)on the text) because it digs deeper in the analysis of religion, in the pieces that open it to further and deeper meaning.

Part of this “opening” in a *khôral* way means that the “spacing” involved allows for room for comparison because, as Derrida explains, “...the meaning of the event on the groundless ground of what I call *khôra*, the groundless ground of a ‘there is,’ ‘it takes place,’ the place of taking place, which is prior to and totally indifferent to this anthropo-theologization, this history of religions and of revelations.”⁷⁷⁹ The location-less location of *khôra* means that spacing has a type of potential for comparisons between concepts that otherwise may not have textual inferences. Derrida’s analysis here is a play on Heideggerian concepts in that they are the “groundless ground.” He goes on to explain this further:

...without this totally indifferent space which does not *give* place to what *takes* place, there would not be this extraordinary movement or desire for giving, for receiving, for appropriating, for *Ereignis* as event and appropriation. This is why religion is interesting to me. I do not say anything against it, but I try to go back to a place or a taking place where the event as a process of reappropriation of an impossible gift becomes possible.⁷⁸⁰

While time and space prohibit a full a discussion of Derrida’s thinking on the gift, the important connection here (with *khôra*) is the idea that what is always to come is what draws together spacing and *khôra*. Spacing within the text is what makes viewing *khôra* as a comparative tool tenable; Derrida saw the potentiality for this in analyzing religion: “I do not know if this structure [*khôra*] is really prior to what comes under the name of revealed religion or even of philosophy, or whether it is through philosophy or the revealed religions, the religions of the book, or any other experience of revelation, that retrospectively we think what I try to think.”⁷⁸¹

To make the case that Derrida viewed the structure (*khôra*) of spacing within a text, even a religious text, as a comparative tool through the prospect of what is always to come in

⁷⁷⁹ Kearney, “On the Gift,” 67. This quote is taken from a response by Derrida.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid. Italics original.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid. 73.

the future, is to make the case that *khôral* spacing will always cause splits and gaps in the text, an opening or fissure in absolute meaning, to breach the bridge of comparative possibility. Hence, the argument can be made for *khôral* spacing within the text and its further use for comparative purposes.

E. Derridean *Khôral* Spacing: The Name of Religion?

Derrida's reading of *khôral* spacing in Plato has analytical value, but he also places some hesitation on "using" *khôra* for specific purposes. Thus, in order to relate *khôra* and any study of religion, further contextualization and nuance is needed. Most obviously, *khôra* is not a thing (like a lens) by which other analytical data points might be drawn; rather, *khôra* is fundamentally a third thing, a (no)thing. Thus, if *khôra* "is" a lens by which the prism of analytical value is determined, it must be negative because it cannot convey presence within the text. This can also be inferred because Derrida connects *khôra* with negative theology: "...the *via negativa* conjugates reference to God, the name of God, with the experience of place. The desert is also a figure of the pure place. But figuration in general results from this spatiality, from this locality of the word."⁷⁸² The spacing within the text does not constitute "being" for Derrida; instead, this spacing is a type of quasi-non-being that calls into question being. The function of negation, in other words, cannot be expressed with simple negativity; *khôra* demonstrates, through its nonbeing-ness, how spacing may call into question its own "use" in texts where it is already "present" as this third thing. The limits of such expression are why Derrida begins one essay with a barrage of questions: "*How 'to talk religion'? Of religion? Singularly of religion, today? How dare we speak of it in the singular without fear and trembling, this very day?*"⁷⁸³

⁷⁸² Jacques Derrida, "Sauf le nom," in *On the Name*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 56-57. Italics original. See also Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 19ff.

⁷⁸³ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 1. Italics original. It is important to note that Derrida follows by calling into question the ability to delimit what religion "is:" "*Here we are confronted by the overwhelming questions of the name and of everything 'done in the name of': questions of the name or noun 'religion', of the names of God, of*

Derrida makes a solid connection between *khôra* and religion that serves as the “spacing” between being and nothingness: “...*in view of a third place that could well have been more than archi-originary, the most anarchic and anarchivable place possible, not the island nor the Promised Land, but a certain desert, that which makes possible, opens, hollows, or infinitizes the other.*”⁷⁸⁴ Derrida here draws what comes before the past (“archi-originary”) and what is (always) to come; for him, this is how religion is drawn in/onto the text. Here, Derrida’s thought on how religion might be appropriated with *khôra* is the most potent, and that which is further examined below in the specific texts of Meister Eckhart:

*Whenever this foundation [the “secret” or “mystical”] founds in foundering, whenever it steals away under the ground of what it founds, at the very instant when, losing itself thus in the desert, it loses the very trace of itself and the memory of a secret, ‘religion’ can only begin and begin again: quasi-automatically, mechanically, machine-like, spontaneously.*⁷⁸⁵

If there is analytical value to be found here, it is to read Derrida’s appropriation of *khôra* as negative. This negativity is not a thing of value, of specific parameters, or even of assignable methodology; rather, the negativity of *khôra* is found in the text itself. Derrida’s study of *khôra* makes several points, of which all pivot on *khôra* as negative. As a pre-original (no)thing, *khôra* calls into question being itself, all while not “existing” as a thing. Here Derrida works out the analogy of desert when describing *khôra* because “...while negating or effacing all, while proceeding to eradicate every predicate and claiming to inhabit the desert...Isn’t the desert a paradoxical figure of the *aporia*?”⁷⁸⁶ The key insight here is that in its pre-original state, *khôra* also operates at the end of language, on the abyss of (non)meaning; this does not pre-suppose linear thinking, nor does it pre-suppose the firm

whether the proper name belongs to the system of language or not, hence, of its untranslatability but also of its iterability...” Ibid. 6. Italics original.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid. 16. Italics original.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid. 19. Italics original.

⁷⁸⁶ Derrida, “Sauf le nom,” 53.

locus⁷⁸⁷ of pre-beginning and end; rather, *khôra* “functions” at the limits, both before the limit of creation and at the linguistic limit of expression.

Applying this thinking to a/the text, *khôra* pre-exists as a gap, an abyss, a desert within the pre-suppositions of the text; applied to a religious text, this means that *khôra* has a pseudo-transcendent value because it pre-originates description, and perhaps experience of, transcendence: “The desert is also a figure of the pure place.”⁷⁸⁸ Furthermore, it calls into question the “place” of the religious text as a firm, authoritative voice (of God, the divine, enlightenment, etc.) that contextualizes everything else. A *khôral* analysis suggests that the religious text contains the same abyss, gap, and desert as any other text. At the limits of language, too, *khôra* also suggests in such an *aporia*, that there is always something to come, an indefinable future. The splits and gaps and deserts of the religious text also call into question the authority of the closed text, the authoritative – finished! – text.⁷⁸⁹ This means that *khôral* negativity insists that the religious text is never complete because there is always something to come.

By its peculiar and difficult (non)place in and at the limits of a text, *khôra* “functions” negatively because it takes away supposed authority of a religious text; in the same way, though, *khôra* means that a religious text can “breathe” anew, being permanently open to interpretation, re-readings, and “life” within it.⁷⁹⁰ By opening the religious text to the future,

⁷⁸⁷ Derrida describes this carefully: “For this location displaces and disorganizes all our onto-topological prejudices, in particular the objective science of space. *Khôra* is over there but more ‘here’ than any ‘here’...” Ibid. 56. Italics original.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid. 57.

⁷⁸⁹ Gary Gutting supports this specific claim with a more general summary: “There will always be textual ambivalences that remain unresolvable and prevent us from understanding fully ‘what the author really means.’” Gary Cutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 292. Furthermore, without delving too deeply in the meaning of author / reader paradigms, it calls into question authorial privilege. Whether religious texts are written by humans or the divine, authorial privilege, totalizing and closing the text, is assumed; Derrida calls this firmly into question.

⁷⁹⁰ It is acknowledged that such statements are general; they are done so purposely. They are in a similar strain as the thesis of Kevin Hart’s early work on Derrida and deconstruction (the theological implications thereof). Specifically, Hart argues that “[a]ll attempts to arrive at a determinate meaning – that is, all attempts to totalize a text – are held to be theological insofar as they assume, at one level or another, that the sign is ultimately grounded in pure self-presence.” Thus, when he states that “...the sign trespasses over its assigned limits,

khôra not only functions negatively within the text, but it suggests a natural “push” to the *aporia* of limitations.

V. Apophatic Theology and Meister Eckhart: *Khôral* Spacing and Detachment

A. The Problem of Metaphysics

Khôra provides (a) key insight into reading Meister Eckhart because it “operates” in this third place, within/out spacing, as pre-originary to the text (and perhaps to God). It is not created, as such, and it is no-thing; it immediately calls into question if there is any “thing” that pre-originate God. This is not the direction this study takes, though, because time and space preclude a full discussion on “being” and God. Rather, the direction taken is with(in) Eckhart’s textual references to detachment. The spacing issue, to remain on this point for a moment, is of vital importance, though; whether or not it is pre-originary to even God himself is simply unknowable because what remains is but a trace. Instead, the issue of spacing, framed contextually with Derrida’s understanding of *khôra*, helps bring out the nuances of Eckhart’s concept of detachment. In turn, this opens wide the possibilities for comparison.

The immediate problem that stems from examining negativity in Eckhart’s thought in terms of a Derridean *khôral* framework concerns metaphysics. Whereas Eckhart’s theological program, framed in the context of the *via negativa*, might be arguably described as thoroughly metaphysical in tone, texture, and textual concern, Derrida’s program might be summed as a critique of metaphysics from within metaphysics.⁷⁹¹ Certainly philosophical

thereby blurring any qualitative distinction between the concept and the sign” he is arguing for an “opening” of sorts within the text, within fixed and assumed meaning. Furthermore, Hart goes on to tie this with Derrida’s project of critiquing “presence” insofar as “...there is not a fall *from* full presence but, as it were, a fall *within* presence, an inability of ‘presence’ to fulfill its promise of being able to form a ground.” This argument helps fill out the meaning of a ground-less theology, a theology that is open to re-interpretation from a religious text that is opened, fissured, and split with deconstruction. See Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 35;14. Italics original.

⁷⁹¹ Coward helps summarize this point: “Derrida’s deconstruction attempts to negate the whole system of metaphysical opposition that has characterized Western philosophy and theology. He criticizes not only the logocentric view but any philosophy that privileges one opposite or extreme over the other. Derrida establishes his critique by deconstructing the viewpoint that has dominated Western metaphysics; namely, that a separate

considerations might be made for their particular loci in the history of thought, but certain interesting questions emerge when probed more deeply. For example, one of Derrida's most articulate and sustained arguments differentiating his own thought from that of negative theology centers around the critique of hyperessentiality. Amongst those differentiations, however, emerges some common ground that is also fodder for inquiry. In general terms, Derrida stresses the importance of what is to come, of a wide open future, of a welcoming of the unknown, the impossible, and the infinite; perhaps in a similar attitude, Eckhart seems to push his own thought to that of *aporia* in his assertions of a fundamentally unknowable, utterly transcendent God. So, while differences are notable, the dialogue that can emerge from such an analysis (considering both points of difference and similarity between Derrida and Eckhart) has value.

The concern here, however, is not primarily with a comparison between these two thinkers; rather, what is considered below is an examination of Eckhart's language, specifically that of detachment, in terms of Derridean *khôra*. The driving methodological question concerns Derrida's sweeping criticism of hyperessentiality in negative theology; more specifically, it should be questioned whether or not this applies to Eckhart's concept of detachment.⁷⁹² Derrida's charge of hyperessentiality pertained to the notion that no matter what is negated, one still seeks a God beyond God; so, this is posed as a thoroughly metaphysical critique: "The God who is 'beyond being' turns out, [Derrida] thinks, to enjoy a higher kind of being, a supreme mode of self-presence, a superessentiality."⁷⁹³ This criticism takes seriously the prospect that God (as presence) is found through negation; this might be

Being or Presence is immediately reflected in speech and then given secondary representation in writing." Coward, "A Hindu Response to Derrida's View of Negative Theology," 214.

⁷⁹² Hart's argument follows similar lines, though his analysis is more of a parsing of detachment: "The central point which most mystics make is that one must be *detached* from the things of the world. The mystic does not deny reason, memory or the will; he or she situates them with respect to a far wider configuration...the complicating feature of most mystical discourse is the insistence upon a double movement of revealing and concealing." Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 267. Italics original.

⁷⁹³ Ibid. 278.

tentatively called negative transcendence. Is Eckhart's thought guilty of negative transcendence in his assertion of the Godhead beyond being? Perhaps, but an analysis is still needed to address this question. In that way, the main idea is that Eckhartian language, described with his understanding of detachment, might be further elucidated with Derridean *khôra*; the background question driving this main idea concerns that of Derrida's critique of hyperessentiality.

B. Eckhartian Language and Aporias: *Khôral* Considerations

Though it has been discussed at length, it is important to bear in mind the particular type of negative theology that is being discussed here. Denys Turner makes an interesting argument "...that there really is no such thing as 'apophatic' *language* at all. For the 'apophatic' is what is achieved...when language *breaks down*. The apophatic is the recognition of how this 'silence' lies, as it were, all around the perimeter of language..."⁷⁹⁴ While the logic of such a position may be defended, the larger purpose here is see how Eckhart does this within a particular context; as Turner continues, "...[Eckhart] knows perfectly well that the unsayable cannot be placed within the grasp of speech. Yet he will use speech, necessarily broken, contradictory, absurd, paradoxical, conceptually hyperbolic speech, to bring to insight the ineffability of God."⁷⁹⁵ From the outset, it might be established that Eckhart is working on the fringes of language, on the abyss of language, perhaps even in/on the *khôral* desert of language. This is why Turner insists there is not an apophatic language *as such*, but this seems to beg the question of whether negation of assumedly cataphatic language means that negativity cannot "exist" within its own (non)space of expression. Turner addresses this in a critical discussion of Bernard McGinn's distinction that the apophatic is "precisely the importance it attaches to the experience of the *absence* of

⁷⁹⁴ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 150. Italics original.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid. 151.

God.”⁷⁹⁶ Even here, though, Turner does well to show that McGinn is skeptical of the value of experience as it is applied to apophaticism.⁷⁹⁷ Thus, if experience cannot “define” (however loosely) apophaticism, nor the absence of God, nor perhaps the negation of cataphatic language, what might be an internal pivot of negative theology? It is here that Derridean *khôra* might well address such an issue, though this is addressed below after a few more distinctions.

To carry such a discussion to its final logical conclusion, Turner ventures into the territory of the negation of negation: “But the final, apophatic, negations *negate difference itself*, and so negate the negation between sameness and difference, the *eadem scientia* which unites opposites.”⁷⁹⁸ This is a key idea in negative theology because it shows how the realms of createdness and divinity are bridged insofar as difference between them is negated; indeed, this is a theme that Eckhart carries through his various sermons and expositions. Whereas here the negation of difference itself can be applied to theological categories, Derridean *khôra* operates on a decidedly non-theological level whereby it pre-originates difference itself. This, too, allows for discussion because if *khôra* pre-originates difference (in this instance between createdness and divinity), does apophaticism provide for a means by which the discussion might return to *khôral* inquiry, all while remaining open to a “future” (of sorts) of non-difference?

It is important to turn here to Eckhart specifically, for the richness of his language helps elucidate how the above ideas might address something deeper in the discussion. Many of the passages discussed below appear from his German sermons; they are selected with the idea that his vernacular sermons would show a more pastoral Eckhart, an Eckhart who is struggling to convey meaning at the limits of language not just for academic sake, but for

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid. 262.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid. 271. Italics original.

parishioners. For example, in *Ego elegi vos de mundo*, Eckhart operates on a perimeter of metaphysics when he starts to tease out the meaning of nothingness: “In created things, as I have often said before, there is no truth. But there is something which is above the created being of the soul and which is untouched by any createdness, by any nothingness.”⁷⁹⁹ Here Eckhart is holding together the concept of a metaphysics of presence, a something beyond, “above,” which is firmly out of the grasp of the created and the possibility of a higher, unaffected being-ness and nothingness. The importance of this transcendent “reality” cannot be overstated; indeed, Eckhart takes this transcendence to the point of where humanity can be identified as God’s Son:

When God sees that we are his only begotten Son, then God presses so urgently upon us and hastens us towards us and acts as if his divine being were about to collapse and become nothing in itself so that he can reveal to us the whole abyss of his Godhead, the abundance of his being and his nature.⁸⁰⁰

The (non)reality of nothingness finds a completion of sorts in the “abyss of his Godhead,” a “place” where “[a]ll created things are nothingness, but this is remote from and alien to all createdness.”⁸⁰¹ Interestingly, prior to this assertion, Eckhart discusses the unity of creatures and God, found in nothingness, whereby the creature forsakes “God for the sake of God.”⁸⁰² There is more than a hint of Neoplatonist metaphysics here, but it seems to go further than that, mainly for the reason that unity with the “one” is more theologically centered on the God beyond God, the God beyond being, the Godhead that stands utterly alone. This may be attributed to pastoral flare, perhaps, but it seems to stem differently.

Derrida’s *khôra* may help to unpack this somewhat; Eckhart’s historical and philosophical position would certainly lend itself to Neoplatonic interpretation, but as mentioned briefly, this does not seem to fully tease out Eckhart’s meaning. Eckhart seems to

⁷⁹⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Ego elegi vos de mundo* (John 15:16); DW 28; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 121.

⁸⁰⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Qui audit me non confundetur* (Ecclus. 24:30); DW 12; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 176.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid. 177.

⁸⁰² Ibid.

be describing a space, but a non-space, where the Godhead and creatures are one, where they “know” unicity. Eckhart will not go so far as to elucidate this (non)space because it is encapsulated by the abyss of the Godhead; a *khôral* interpretation takes seriously a non-space, pre-originary to all things, where a type of paradoxical unicity might be possible. This might be called the *khôral* space of the Godhead as it is nothingness within the createdness of being. This would further substantiate a *khôral* (non)spacing within the creature where God “lives” in His abyss of the Godhead. This is what Oliver Davies calls “a timeless and eternal state beyond particularity.”⁸⁰³ Furthermore, Davies rightly spells out how Eckhart is trying to go beyond particularity in his language: “Something of this same ‘de-concretization’ is achieved through Eckhart’s abundant use of negative forms. Indeed, this is one of the principal areas in which he shows his astonishing ability to make language register the very transcendence which he is striving to communicate.”⁸⁰⁴ The question here is whether or not Eckhart is successful in doing so; does he squarely communicate the transcendence of non-existence in(to) the unicity of God/head? Again, Derrida’s *khôra* helps bridge the gap because the pre-originary difficulty of expressing unicity is further pushed to *aporia* through the “space” that is God’s alone. This (non)space is rather counter-negative in the sense that it is understood through the prism of unicity, but not in particularity (in the realm of difference) of createdness. Thus, *khôra* may help contribute a sort of (non)lens whereby the unicity of (the) God/head is viewed from within/out the metaphysics of presence.

In order to flesh this out a bit more, though, a further discussion of negativity is needed; an internal logic of negation is needed to see how *khôra* might contribute to a reading of Eckhart’s most difficult concepts. In *Unus deus et pater omnium*, Eckhart methodically addresses the logic of negativity, specifically with the idea of the negation of negation.⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰³ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 191.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid. 190-191.

⁸⁰⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 180-184.

Again, his linking of the negation of negation with unicity clearly has Neoplatonist undertones, though his fleshing out the concept takes on decidedly different theological directions. Eckhart's discussion in this sermon contributes to his goal of differentiating between the creature and God in a way that moves toward unicity:

If I say that God is good, then I am adding something to him. Oneness on the other hand is a negation of negation and a denial of denial... The soul takes the Godhead where it is purified in itself, where nothing has been added to it, where nothing has been thought. One is the negation of negation. All creatures contain a negation within themselves: one creature denies that it is another... But with God there is a negation of negation: he is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God.⁸⁰⁶

This helps fill out the further problem of the logic of negativity as it applies to unicity; further, it conveys the "infinity of God:" "[t]o define the nature of something created is at the same time to say what it is not, while in defining the nature of God, the uncreated, we negate the principle of negation itself. The negation of negation thus becomes 'the purest form of affirmation as applied to God.'"⁸⁰⁷ Within the internal logic of this negation, an apophatic logic that affirms through negation, "God" begins to disappear into the completely "otherness" of the Godhead; again a *khôral* interpretation might stress the "other" which remains completely apart from thing-ness in a way that preserves the absolute "otherness" of God; does this get closer to Eckhart's assertion that God is no-thing?

In this same strain, Eckhart goes to great lengths to parse out his language of "otherness," to the point where his apophaticism seems to be a response to an ever-constant threat of idolatry. His language takes this into serious consideration: "The eternal Word is both the medium and the image itself, which exists without mediation and without image so that the soul can comprehend God in the eternal Word, knowing him directly without an

⁸⁰⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Unus deus et pater omnium* (Eph. 4:6); DW 21; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 182.

⁸⁰⁷ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 109.

image.”⁸⁰⁸ Here Eckhart’s apophaticism makes a careful distinction of the language of description and how it is fundamentally “other” as it is completely separate from the createdness of images. In a *khôral* interpretation, it might be said that Eckhart’s parsing of such language means that there is an internal nothingness, a desert of meaning, that protects the “otherness” of (the) God/head. Knowing the Word of God without an image would be a *khôral* ~~image~~ because it is outside fixed meaning; it is thoroughly this “third” thing beyond forms and God/head.⁸⁰⁹ This *khôral* ~~image~~, a way of describing that is thoroughly “other” in God’s own “self” – a “self” that is fundamentally unicity – helps elucidate further Davies’ assertion of “...a journey, a pilgrimage, through an ever changing conceptual landscape into a deepening awareness of the utter transcendence and unknowability of God.”⁸¹⁰ There is a direct and paradoxical relationship between the *khôral* “otherness” and the “unknowability of God” here; it helps frame the context of Eckhart’s apophatic negativity because there is a sharp contrast between God and Godhead. It calls into question the ability to even know/assert the “name” of God,⁸¹¹ in very much the same strain of thought as Derrida’s struggle in *Sauf le nom*.⁸¹² The pattern by which the text names God and differentiates God from God/head is seemingly lost amongst the apophatic clarifications; however, *khôra* shows an otherness, a radical desert-ification with/in the “name” of God because it stands both in/outside of God/head. This demonstrates the larger point: Eckhart’s language is *khôrically*

⁸⁰⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Modicum et iam non videbitis me (John 16:16)*; DW 69; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 211.

⁸⁰⁹ The idea here is to show, under erasure, how “to trace and circumscribe the metaphysics within theology...[because deconstruction’s] strategy of using language ‘under erasure’ illuminates particular moves and attitudes in mystical texts.” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, xxxv. Furthermore, this is necessary (in a larger scale) for “crossing over from the phenomenal to the transcendent involves a provisional crossing *out* of a word’s metaphysical commitment.” Ibid. 136. Italics original.

⁸¹⁰ Davies, *God Within*, 47.

⁸¹¹ For a helpful discussion of this point, see Davies’ *God Within*, 50ff.

⁸¹² Derrida’s struggle in “Sauf le nom” might be best illustrated with “[t]his coming to being starting from nothing and *as nothing*, *as God and as Nothing*, as the Nothing itself, this birth that *carries itself* without premise, this becoming-self as becoming-God – or Nothing – that is what appears impossible, more than impossible, the most impossible possible, more impossible than the impossible if the impossible is the simple negative modality of the possible.” Derrida, “Sauf le nom,” 43. Italics original.

pre-originary because it “contains” the otherness of the desert/nothingness within the Godhead.

To quickly sum this section, Eckhart’s language is pushed to *aporia*, to absolute limits, in its stress upon the otherness of God. This helps set up the context of *khôra* within Eckhart’s language because the metaphysics of presence seemingly breaks down. If the pre-originary status of the language of desert applies to otherness of (the) God/head, then *khôral* interpretation shows how Eckhart’s logic (negation of negation, etc.) might, too, stand outside the realm of metaphysics. Like Derrida, Eckhart must enter into a metaphysical discussion of the desert, of the presence of God as unicity, but the thrust of his argument, namely the negation of negation, shows how the desert of God, fundamentally a *khôra*, defies a definable presence / absence paradigm. This sets up the logical question of how humanity, in its createdness, is part of that unicity, the unicity of (the) God/head that is *khôrically* linked in what Eckhart calls “detachment.”

C. Detachment and (the) Language of *Khôra*

For Eckhart, the metaphysical questions of God’s presence are developed in his concept of detachment. God “exists” in his own radical freedom, a “place” completely and utterly separate of createdness, perhaps a *khôral* place, where God remains completely other.⁸¹³ Detachment is the way/path/means by which humanity uncovers or reveals God within the self. In other words, detachment is the way to unicity. This is not taken lightly, though, for as Caputo has argued, “...if we press Eckhart about his Neoplatonic henology, his metaphysics of the one, he has to give that up, too, as much idolatry, so much onto-theo-

⁸¹³ Turner describes this well: “It is a light, moreover, which is a ‘nothing’, an ‘emptiness’, a ‘desert’, it is formless and featureless and it is all these things with the nothingness, the emptiness and the desert-like formlessness and featurelessness of the Godhead. They cannot be distinguished, for ‘with this power (intellect)’, Eckhart says, ‘the soul works in nonbeing and so follows God who works in nonbeing.’” Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 159.

logic.”⁸¹⁴ Rather, Eckhart is pushing toward a *khôral* state, a non-place of pre-originary “existence” in which the detached self is completely and utterly no-thing; paradoxically, this is not a condition in which one strives for some sort of perfection. Instead, detachment is this *khôral* place, this pre-originary state of unicity; Turner helps bring this out: “This ‘detachment’ is not the breakthrough into the ground of God where I stand in my ground as an uncreated nothingness. True detachment, on the contrary, is my becoming in desire what I am in myself: nothing, an *unum indistinctum*.”⁸¹⁵ There is a connection between this unicity and detachment, found in the *khôral* desert of nothingness, “[f]or our entire being is founded purely on a process of becoming nothingness.”⁸¹⁶

The question remains, though: what does it mean to “become nothingness”? How does Eckhart’s notion of detachment, found in the *khôral* desert our own (non)being, “become” the nothingness that is unicity with God? Eckhart makes an interesting textual connection here, stating in *Qui audit me non confundetur*, “For if we are to hear God’s word, we must be wholly detached. The hearer is the same as the heard in the eternal Word.”⁸¹⁷ Eckhart’s appeal to language, even if he is operating on the limits of language, is still rooted in the understanding that the transcendence of (the) God/head is communicated in/through/by a text. The *khôral* desert of our non-being is found by means of this text, but the communicative nature of the language employed by Eckhart pushes meaning to the limits of transcendence. This is why Eckhart implores his hearers to “renounce God for the sake of God and to be free of God for God’s sake.”⁸¹⁸ Eckhart squarely deals with the problem of “presence” in his concept of the detached soul because he struggles to describe how the detached soul is in a “place” – a *khôral* place of otherness – whereby “...when we were

⁸¹⁴ Caputo, “Mysticism and Transgression,” 38.

⁸¹⁵ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 181. Italics original.

⁸¹⁶ Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction, On Inner and Outer Works*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 46.

⁸¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Qui audit me non confundetur* (Ecclus. 24:30); DW 12; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 175-176.

⁸¹⁸ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 64.

contained in the eternal essence of God, there was nothing other than God in us, but what was in us was ourselves.”⁸¹⁹ The issue of presence is, for Eckhart, wrapped up in this pre-originary state with/in (the) God/head. Eckhart’s struggle within metaphysics to overcome his own understanding of presence is formidable; for example, he tries to relate these concepts in description: “Therefore we ask God to free us from ‘God’ so that we may be able to grasp and eternally enjoy truth where the highest angels, the fly and the human soul are all one – in that place where I desired what I was and was what I desired.”⁸²⁰

A common theme in Eckhart’s discussion of detachment centers around losing the self; paradoxically, this is where “true” presence is found, *khôral* presence that is neither defined as such nor negated:

The soul must exist in a free nothingness. That we should forsake God is altogether what God intends, for as long as the soul has God, knows God and is aware of God, she is far from God. This then is God’s desire – that God should reduce himself to nothing in the soul so that the soul may lose herself.⁸²¹

The implications of presence are immense because, as Davies writes, “[w]e must leave the dimensions of time and place, which determine our specific being and which are foreign to God in his transcendence.”⁸²² This is no simple negation of time and place, though, for as Davies goes on, “Detachment, for Eckhart, is the kind of living in the world which results from the birth of God in the soul and the actualization of the God-like essence within us.”⁸²³ The analysis here must go further, though, because detachment, understood as a “place” of *khôral* otherness, means that God’s “actualization of the God-like essence within us” is more akin to absence, albeit *khôral* absence. This means that the desert within the soul, the

⁸¹⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum* (Matt. 5:3); DW 52; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 205.

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ Meister Eckhart, [no title, *German sermon*]; J 82; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 244.

⁸²² Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 165. Davies goes on to argue that Eckhart’s detachment is to be understood in a fundamentally moral dimension. This is also taken up by Denys Turner; see his *Darkness*, 172ff. The moral dimension as such is not specifically addressed here because the main thrust of this section deals with the place, albeit *khôral* place of detachment.

⁸²³ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 174.

absolute void of presence and of absence, is the “place” of God-meeting-the-soul, the *khôral* no-place in which God’s absence/presence is (no)place itself. Turner describes no-place as exactly the place where Eckhart locates the union of the soul with God: “Detachment is complete self-emptying: it is the digging out of a void, an abyss within the self, a vacuum into which God is inevitably drawn. God cannot resist the detached soul...”⁸²⁴ The *khôral* presence/absence of God is the (no)place and the (no)thing with which the soul reaches utter unity: “Detachment is the way of achieving that nameless, featureless depth within the self which is identical with the Godhead and which is, also, in another way, my own identity.”⁸²⁵ This “depth” is that *khôral* (no)place in which God disappears into the Godhead, a place where unicity is both no-thing and absolute. The faculties of reason are no longer applicable in this “void and the desert of detachment” in which the soul “live[s] without an explanation, without rationale, namelessly one with the nameless God.”⁸²⁶

The point of the above analysis is not to whittle away reason and rationality with apophaticism to reach some point of absurdity, nor does it presuppose the ability to operate on the limits of language.⁸²⁷ Rather, the point is to get to something that Eckhart struggles with throughout his texts: pressing away for the freedom with which to show “...there is something which is above the created being of the soul...which is untouched by any createdness, by any nothingness.”⁸²⁸ This is a radical freedom, a freedom that is determined

⁸²⁴ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 172. Turner continues: “Detachment, moreover, makes a person free not only ‘from all created things’, but from anything less than the uncreated silence, unity and emptiness of the Godhead, even from God-the-Creator.” Ibid. 172-173.

⁸²⁵ Ibid. 173.

⁸²⁶ Ibid. 184.

⁸²⁷ Part of this concerns bringing out textual nuances as they reflect the attitude of Eckhart insofar as “Deconstruction can illuminate how mysticism and negative theology work as discourses: certain concepts and textual manoeuvres developed by Derrida can be used to analyze the mystical theologian’s use of language and his or her attitude to it.” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 174. This follows a pattern with which Derrida notes in his *Grammatology*: “We are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign – which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence) – remains systematically and genealogically determined by that history. It is there that the concept and above all the work of deconstruction, its ‘style,’ remain by nature exposed to misunderstanding and nonrecognition.” Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.

⁸²⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Ego elegi vos de mundo* (John 15:16); DW 28; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 121.

by emptiness and *khôral* no-place, a freedom that “is free of all names and is devoid of all forms, quite empty and free as God is empty and free in himself.”⁸²⁹ To be free of “all names and...devoid of all forms” means a *khôral* freedom with which God enters the soul and transforms it within the context of unicity. Turner’s analysis of this transformation is worth quoting at length:

...for Eckhart it is detachment which is the strategy of the uncovering and revealing of the spark of the soul, so it is by detachment that we discover our true selves. Eckhart’s detachment is not the mechanism whereby space is made for God to occupy; it is rather, the process whereby space is recovered from the infilling of attachments. Eckhart’s detachment, we might say, is archaeological rather than architectural.⁸³⁰

The important part of Turner’s analysis focuses on the “archaeological” aspect of detachment, namely because it is the space, the *khôral* space with which God can “recover” the soul. The salvific connection with *khôra* cannot be denied here; it is how (the) God/head frees the soul, returning it to its pre/originary state, a state of complete and utter freedom.

VI. Conclusion

From the outset, it might seem a bit strange to examine Derrida’s deconstruction of Plato’s *khôra* in order to further examine Eckhart’s concept of detachment. However, as demonstrated above, it can be a fruitful conversation because the (no)space and (no)time and the (no)thing of *khôra* lends itself to filling out Eckhart’s “place” of the soul in the nothingness of God and in the unicity of the one. Furthermore, because Derrida works from within the parameters of metaphysics, albeit in a way to show the limitations and, ultimately, illusion of metaphysics,⁸³¹ the comparison is possible because Eckhart’s thought is

⁸²⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum in domum suam (Luke 10:38)*; DW 2; Oliver Davies, *Selected Writings*, 163.

⁸³⁰ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 176.

⁸³¹ Hart describes this as a “fall *within* presence, an inability of ‘presence’ to fulfill its promise of being able to form a ground.” He is making the careful distinction from a “fall *from* full presence,” from “a fall *within* presence.” This is important to note because “[f]ull presence, for Derrida, is not a prelapsarian ideal for an eschatological hope, but an illusory goal - the illusion being that there is in fact something outside the sign system which can escape its determinations.” Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 14. Italics original.

thoroughly grounded in metaphysics. The methodological question here, though, has been whether or not Eckhart has really been working in the hyperessentiality that Derrida criticizes him (and other apophatic thinkers) of many years later. Granted, an analysis of Eckhart's thought can quickly point out that he is striving for a/the God "beyond" God, which at first glance may seem squarely metaphysical; even Eckhart's term for this, the Godhead, seems to betray a certain amount of confidence in the stripping away of layers of assumed presence and absence to get at the nothingness of God.⁸³²

To examine this more fully, the full criticism of Derrida is needed:

...in every discourse that seems to return to a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination, endlessly multiplying the defenses and the apophatic warnings: this, which is called X (for example, text, writing, the trace, difference, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc.) "is" neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent, not even neutral, not even subject to a dialectic with a third moment, without any possible sublation ("Aufhebung"). Despite appearances, then, this X is neither a concept nor even a name; it *does lend* itself to a series of names, but calls for another syntax, and exceeds even the order and structure of predicative discourse. It "is" not and does say what "is." It is written completely otherwise.⁸³³

This criticism of a/the negative theology is apt because it seeks to tear away the basic assumptions of apophaticism; the question here is if Eckhart falls within this same category. In many cases he does; the "otherness" to his language seems to presuppose a supplement with which there is a "core" understanding to which apophaticism may approach, eventually.⁸³⁴ In Eckhart's appropriation of Neoplatonic philosophy, he calls this Godhead,

⁸³² Caputo argues that Eckhart "wanted to establish the Being of god in so pure a region that the affirmation of His Being had to be continually purified by a denial of Being." While this is certainly indicative of a conventional reading of Eckhart, Caputo does not go far enough here. Eckhart does operate on a type of ever-negating platform, as it were, but the intent seems to go beyond "the purity of Being" insofar as he pushes negative language to its aporia. Rather than a strictly "non-ontic function," Eckhart seems to go beyond even these qualifications into a sense of nothingness that is even beyond language, however negatively conceived and affirmed. Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression," 27.

⁸³³ Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 74.

⁸³⁴ Here Hart highlights these points with a contrast of Derrida and Eckhart's thought: "What worries [Derrida] about apophatic discourse is that, despite all its ruses and deferrals, it is committed in advance to a singular

one, etc.⁸³⁵ But Eckhart seems to go further than that, and perhaps further than Derrida's capable criticism.

There is another core, if that is even possible, to Eckhart's thought, which defies the language with which he tries to employ it; it is buried deep within/out his linguistic limitations, for it is a type of negative transcendence. It is not a transcendence directly from/by/with (the) God/head, but a sort of negative-transcendence which stands ready to negate "itself" in the face of transcendence. It does not slip through the cracks of supplementation, but rather stands in a completely "other," in much the same way that Derrida strives for in his own thought.⁸³⁶ It is a negative-transcendence that stands at the ready for the other, for tomorrow, for what is to come, a *viens oui oui ad infinitum*, or as Caputo puts it, "[t]he fragility of our structures, the desert emptiness of our signifiers, are such stuff (hyperstasis) as faith is made of, our faith in what is to come, and this very desertification is the condition of keeping faith and hope and desire alive."⁸³⁷ While Derrida certainly criticizes his own position, and much of the success or failure of his thought is predicated on his ability to deconstruct even his own analysis, Eckhart does the same thing: his thought is rooted in the groundless "other," a negative-transcendence that goes beyond – and in front of – hyperessentiality.

destination; it promises to lead one beyond being to the immediacy of a presence, to God." Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 284.

⁸³⁵ Caputo, in the final analysis, separates out Eckhart from Neoplatonic thought: "What Eckhart taught had little to do with a Neoplatonic One or a super-essential presence. Rather he taught with irrepressible exuberance the joyful wisdom of a life graced by God and the in the process shattered with loving joy the most prized graven images of the onto-theo-logic." Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression," 39. While Eckhart's writing demonstrates this attitude, even to the point of urgency, this is not how he overcomes Neoplatonic thought because, arguably, Neoplatonic thinkers exhibited similar "exuberance." Rather, it is not so much that Eckhart overcame Neoplatonic thought, but he *surpassed* it. His descriptions seem to go into a negative transcendence that is not present in Neoplatonic thought; while time and space limit the ability to demonstrate this fully, Eckhart seems willing to negate the forms and divinity that inform Neoplatonism, even at the expense of the One that is central to this school of thought. For Eckhart, the *One* seems to be written under erasure as well.

⁸³⁶ Coward describes this well (from Derrida's point-of-view): "While there is no direct intuition for Derrida, there is silence that is not a void or a nihilism but that is filled with the insistent stirrings of god. Thus even in the ultimate silence there is the experience of difference for Derrida." Coward, "A Hindu Response to Derrida's View of Negative Theology," 209.

⁸³⁷ Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," 217.

Conclusion

I. Summing Up: A Typology of Negativity

As means to sum up so far, it is necessary to return to the typology of negativity set forth in the introductory chapter. Negativity understood dynamically as multiple parts of speech, capable of expressing negation at multiple levels simultaneously, serves as the backdrop to the entire argument. Negation is not employed arbitrarily within the internal logic, but rather as something of an ongoing theme that shapes the structure of this comparative analysis. The typology set forth in the introduction acts as a meta-analysis of the argument presented, though it is not alluded to specifically; the strategic purpose in that is to allow for the analysis to drill down through the various layers of negativity, specifically with emptiness in Buddhism, apophaticism in Christianity, and then further with special reference to Derridean deconstruction.

One of the main features of the established typology is the insistence upon developing the certain types of negativity within Buddhist and Christian thought as *separate* constructs. This makes for a complex comparison where any direct comparison occurs within the typology (namely, below), but not necessarily within the developing chapters. This intentional separation is meant to actively tease out the parts that may be of comparative value, but only with the independent voices of the two religious traditions.

From a *prima facie* analysis, Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism share quite little save that of tantalizing inference in what “emptiness” and “apophaticism” might mean. Once an analysis is performed on both traditions, as was conducted in Chapters Two and Three, the complexities seem to pit the concepts even further apart. How is a comparison even possible, or even tenable? To go back further prior to this question, what is the value in comparing Christianity and Buddhism? As was set forth in the introduction, the primary goal of inter-religious dialogue drives the methodology here, namely from the standpoint of

informed discussion; this means understanding a finer point of the analysis. In this case, emptiness and apophaticism were selected because of a more nuanced connection in negativity; the methodology employed a typology of negativity to drill down further in what “emptiness” and “apophaticism” mean in the respective tradition. To return to the question of how a comparison is possible, or even tenable, the answer now lies in how negativity is appropriated separately in the traditions.

If the key piece to an inter-religious dialogue is found in the insistence, and indeed performance, of separate analyses whereby the unique voice is found within the tradition, then comparison might be possible at this point. This does not, however, get at the further point of how the language of emptiness and apophaticism may contribute to a comparison; in other words, the groundwork of analysis in Chapters Two and Three, while necessary to the overall context, cannot themselves serve as the root basis of comparison. More simply, the analysis is an exploration of Buddhist emptiness through specific lenses and the exploration of Christian apophaticism is also through specific lenses, but the limitations here are apparent: the analysis alone does not lend any common ground between the two traditions. Indeed, after the second and third chapters, it might be said that Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism could not be further apart. By preserving the necessity of a unique voice, the possibility of an internal bridge between the two does not emerge. This might be described as a central missing element in most comparative analyses: by trying to formulate an internal bridge, one or both elements suffer a loss of unique religious identity. Thus, the product is, *prima facie*, a comparison, but the depth and meaning of that comparison is limited.

In order to overcome this methodological problem, a third party is needed to align the unique voices that might not even be using the same vocabulary. This third party should have no specific interest in promoting one voice over the other, but instead has the capacity to

engage the religious tradition in a meaningful and challenging way. For this project, the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida is the selected third party, the bridge between Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism. Derridean deconstruction is a neutral “voice” that can align the unique voices of Christianity and Buddhism. For while Derrida himself was aware of Buddhism, there is very little textual evidence of a sustained interest; conversely, Derrida’s deconstruction was identified early on as having roots in apophatic theology. However, Derrida took many years to respond to this directly, and when he did, it was tenuous and certainly not a direct appropriation of apophatic thought. In short, Derrida is not a religious thinker; while much of his thought has religious intersections, the primary “goal” (if it can be called that for sake of the argument) is engagement and critique of Western metaphysics. So, while he addresses the possibilities of his work serving apophatic purposes, it is not directly (or even indirectly) correlative to Christian apophaticism. To that end, the *latent* measure of deconstruction, herein argued as *différance*, allows for deeper introspection into the possibilities of Buddhist emptiness in Chapter Four. It is that same latent measure of deconstruction, this time found in his understanding of *khôra* that allows for similar engagement with Christian apophaticism.

The curious aspect of applying Derridean *différance* to Buddhist emptiness and Derridean *khôra* to Christian apophaticism is that they both independently come to what is described here as “negative transcendence,” though at this point the term has not yet been fully worked out. This penultimate conclusion for both emerged independently from Derridean deconstruction; though the same method was applied to both traditions, the deconstructed (un)form seemed to take on a something “other” that transcends the religious tradition, its texts, and even its voice. However, this “other” is not a quality of some slippery meaning, shifting paradigm, or authoritative voice, but is dynamically negative in its appropriation of whatever transcendence might be “there.” Even this, it might be objected,

still requires language structures, specifically religious language structures, to convey, even if the meaning is a thoroughgoing negativity. This is addressed specifically in how the typology of negativity conveys meaning that seeks some sort of connection between Chapters Two through Five.

What must be worked out at this point is how the typology of negativity, informed by the dynamic commonality of “negative transcendence,” can (re)form a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism.

II. An Outworking of the Typology: Negative Transcendence and the Possibility of the “Other”

As highlighted throughout the introduction and the summation above, a comparison of entire religious traditions is rife with difficulty and compromise; in order to attempt any sort of authentic comparison, specific contexts must be established. The attempt herein to develop a meaningful comparison is undertaken only after lengthy effort to contextualize each tradition with its own, unique voice. The contextualization of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism with Derridean deconstruction leads independently to a penultimate conclusion of what has been termed here, “negative transcendence.” This is the key by which a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism may “occur.”

Describing what negative transcendence “is” or “is not” runs the risk of belittling possibility, a radical “otherness” that is not constrained by definition;⁸³⁸ rather elucidation must “occur” in this time and space as means of Buddhist-Christian comparison. Any attempt below to work out what negative transcendence “is” is an attempt within a very specific context of Buddhist-Christian comparison. It is a working out of what Derrida calls the “impossible,” while understanding the *aporias* of religious language as just that: a

⁸³⁸ The indeterminate and rather vague language here is purposeful because “...it is no business of deconstruction – indeed it goes against the grain of deconstruction – to specify some *determinable* faith, to specify what faith is faith in, to calm the storm or arrest the play in which faith takes shape by proposing a determinate object of faith, some common faith.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 64. Italics original.

possibility, an “other” that is not yet worked out. Negative transcendence also takes into consideration Derrida’s criticism of the transcendental signified, but reframes how it might apply to religious questions.⁸³⁹ As means of clarification, the starting point of negative transcendence might be found in Kevin Hart’s conclusion to his “Appendix to the 2000 Edition” of his *Trespass of the Sign*:

What Derrida helps bring into focus is that the possible and the impossible are not to be resolved dialectically or logically: they arrange and rearrange themselves in the negative form of an aporia. Religious experience pulls a person in different directions at the same time, demanding we attend both to the possible and the impossible; and in negotiating this aporia one’s conscience is never satisfied. This experience of desire, dissatisfaction, insufficiency, and uncertainty is part of the God effect.⁸⁴⁰

Hart’s conclusion is fodder for so much more analysis, namely in that realm deemed the “impossible,” the “other” of religious language. Indeed, Derrida does show that these things, including a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism, cannot be worked out “dialectically or logically.” Negative transcendence is that by which religious language must enter into “a new concept of writing” whereby “[t]he play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself.”⁸⁴¹ Negative transcendence is the play of *différences*/differences coupled with the “otherness” of *khôral* time and space whereby comparison of two different religions is possible.

Perhaps the most paradoxical “trait” of negative transcendence is the resistance to a/the unicity, a oneness that finds expression in both Christian apophaticism and Buddhist emptiness. Contra to the philosophical backdrop of Eckhart’s God beyond God, negative transcendence is oneness with erasure, ~~oneness~~, transcendence that is neither one nor

⁸³⁹ Here, Caputo provides a bit of context insofar as he responds to those who criticize Derrida’s position: “They would saturate Derrida’s horizons with secularism and insist that deconstruction’s rejection of the transcendental signified means the death of God, as if a little *a* in *différance* spells the end of religion, God, and faith.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 18. Italics original.

⁸⁴⁰ Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 296.

⁸⁴¹ Derrida, *Positions*, 26.

multiplicity because it stands at the ready for the other. Likewise, negative transcendence means the non-substantiality of Buddhism, argued as a type of critique to oneness with emptiness, almost comes to the fore as a type of negative oneness. Again, this is ~~oneness~~ under erasure because emptiness resists substantiality, even of itself; negative transcendence goes further, though, because it is neither one nor multiplicity. Otherness means that neither oneness nor multiplicity nor utter emptiness are possibilities as such because to stand ready for the impossible, the truly other, means the inability to “know” what is coming through (negative) transcendence.

This working-out of negative transcendence is at once trapped in *aporia* and ultimately free to break down the normal bounds of language; it takes seriously the claim by Derrida that “[t]here are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces” because it is not informed by metaphysics or some sort of claim upon presence or being.⁸⁴² Conventional definitions of transcendence fail to convey what might be analyzed through the *erasure* of transcendence, a negation that serves both a positive and negative function of expression. Negative transcendence is positive because it asserts the validity of an *aporia*, supports the pushing beyond the natural limitations of the “other,” and welcomes the impossible because it is ready to negate all expressions, including “itself.” Nevertheless, there is a negative function as well: it is impossible to assert the impossible except under constraints of erasure. The negative function must negate *ad infinitum* with no hope of reaching a starting point, (a) causation, or any form of unicity.

Throughout the text, the parasitical nature of deconstruction has been alluded to in order to contextualize what is happening in the internal structures/meanings/significations of religious language. Furthermore, negativity expressed with Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism shows a certain parasitic function on religious language: even the meaning of

⁸⁴² Ibid.

non-substantiality in Buddhist emptiness is called into question as too fixed just like the metaphysical nature of the God beyond God in Christian apophaticism is called into question as hyperessentiality. At some point, the parasitical nature of deconstruction helps analyze religious language in a way that is both co-equal in effect and stripped of fixed meaning; more directly applied, this means that religious language in Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism can begin to dialogue.⁸⁴³

Religious language, as it functions to bind together belief systems of people in multiple societies, historical times, and geographical locations, assumes an interior logic of authority and power. The assumed and accepted authority of religious language helps develop what are termed “sacred” texts whereby a/the God or some over-arching belief system conveys truth, sacredness, or a code of ethics. What Derridean deconstruction does, then, in effect, is call into question this authority not so much as anti-authority, but as an assumed or accepted, fixed and permanent meaning. Derridean deconstruction (not religious expression *as such* but applicable to all language forms) calls assumed authority into question because it asserts otherness and difference/*différance*.⁸⁴⁴ This is contrary to a *prima facie* reading of religious texts that attempt to demonstrate definitive narratives for the purpose of binding together belief systems; rather by showing otherness and difference/*différance* through competing voices, contexts, and other narratives, the assumed authority of religious language is called into question because “[t]here is no stable center that itself gives meaning to expression. Play alone remains, where play is the interpretive activity freed of the

⁸⁴³ This ties back with Gavin Flood’s charge, “There is comparatively little work done on the paradigms operative within the study of religions, an unquestioning use of methods developed long ago and, although with notable exceptions, a suspicion of any metatheoretical perspective...Metatheory provides a rigour at the level of discourse, interfaces with other disciplines and so integrates religious studies into the wider academy, and the only way a discipline can develop is through reflexive critique.” Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 4-5.

⁸⁴⁴ It is important to note that it may be questioned if deconstruction is, itself, a type of authority which simply asserts itself over other claims of authority. This is a fair question, but the immediate response is that deconstruction is also a self/auto –deconstruction insofar as it does not allow itself be an authoritative vision over all others. Rather, as Derrida stresses throughout the corpus of his texts, deconstruction is a fissure, an opening, an analysis of the hidden voices within a text. This is why deconstruction is a powerful “tool” of sorts for religious inquiry.

constriction that arises from a belief in the controlling presence of Being.”⁸⁴⁵ In this project, the typology of negativity functions as a type of deconstruction by which to call into question assumed authority of emptiness in Buddhism (demonstrated through non-substantiality of all things) and apophaticism in Christian apophaticism (demonstrated through detachment and responding to the charge of hyperessentiality). Yet, various “other” voices creep through the typology; this is exactly the point of deconstruction as it applies to religious inquiry: the other voices, competing narratives, and multiple interpretations open religious language to the other, to tomorrow, to comparison with(in) the context of deconstruction. Caputo’s comments help frame this:

Deconstruction is a way to let faith function more ad-ventfully, with an enhanced sense of advent and event, gladdened by the good news of alterity by which we are always and already summoned. Beyond that, deconstruction is *itself* a form of faith, a faith in the *viens*, a hope in what is coming, one which says we are always a little blind and it is necessary to believe. *Il faut croire*.⁸⁴⁶

From here, a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism is possible with negative transcendence because the other is broken open into the realm of possibility; this is close to what Derrida calls “representation in the abyss of presence,” for negative transcendence is an “indefinitely multiplied structure...the indefinite process of supplementarity [that] has already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self.”⁸⁴⁷ Negative transcendence is a relation between loss and absence but without the metaphysical baggage of filling-in; thus it remains open to the other permanently. This openness is exactly how a comparison between Christianity and Buddhism is possible.

⁸⁴⁵ William Dean, “Deconstruction and Process Theology,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 1984): 3-4.

⁸⁴⁶ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 18. Italics original.

⁸⁴⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

III. Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Nothingness: A Comparison

What is left here? How can all of the splits and fissures of this project be brought together for some kind of comparison between Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism? Is it sufficient to say that there is no connection, or is it more honest to say that the two traditions function in completely different ways? Negative transcendence, informed through/by/in deconstruction, shows that negativity plays a key role in bridging Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism; so the assertion that there is no connection is untenable. There is some-“thing” here, expressed in no-“thing,” that informs both traditions, that serves the function of both religions dialoguing in terms of emptiness and apophaticism. In his recent collection of essays, David Loy proposes some ideas that approach this comparison: “...the infinite set of differential traces that constitutes each of us is nothing less than the whole universe... We want to meet God face-to-face, or gain enlightenment, but the fact that everything is *shunya* means we can never attain that. We can, however, realize what we have always been – and never been.”⁸⁴⁸ Here Loy wrestles with the possibility of unicity, though a negative unicity, in terms that are indicative of a Christian or Buddhist perspective. Though he approaches a comparison, Loy seems to indicate that emptiness is what prevents a comparison, not what supports it.

The search for a comparison is, at its root, what Derrida might call a “passion of the origin...the writing that retraces the origin, tracking down the signs of its disappearance, the lost writing of the origin.”⁸⁴⁹ Thus, this comparison runs the risk of committing the falsity that Derrida describes as “...a trace which replaces presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun.”⁸⁵⁰ Does a comparison assume that there is a

⁸⁴⁸ David R. Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 49. Italics removed from original.

⁸⁴⁹ Derrida, “Ellipsis,” 295.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid. Arguably, much of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* deals with the problem of origin(s) in writing. This problem “creates” something of a framework of thought here because it informs how previous comparisons

common root, an origin, by which a bridge may be made? Simply put, a comparison by conventional language fails the intentions here; what is sought is not an origin, for it is acknowledged that all writing (including religious writing) is a trace of a trace, but a moving, unfixed bridge by which common conversation between Christianity and Buddhism might occur. As Youxuan Wang sums, “In spite of Derrida’s impatience with the metaphysical obsession with presence, in spite of his warning against an essentialist reading of his own text, his primary concern is still with the ‘origin’...His deconstruction is motivated by an overwhelming desire to reach an origin of sorts.”⁸⁵¹ Thus, the comparative locus, a non-locus, is found in openness to the other, a deconstruction of both traditions’ assumed authority over its language and meaning. Christian apophaticism and Buddhist emptiness have an interior negative language that informs how each one “functions;” through Derridean *différance* and *khôra*, this study has shown how each might be “broken-up,” disseminated, and allowed the voices of difference and otherness to inform the dialogue.⁸⁵² Thus, the focus of this comparison is not on tracing some origin back to find commonalities, but rather to highlight the commonalities found in difference and otherness. The commonalities include the rejection of a master-concept that informs all other components of the religious language, negativity as method by which to examine religious language, and the openness to the “other” by which some-“thing” is always to come.

A. A Rejection of Master-Concepts and Religious Language(s)

The assumed authority of religious language as it pertains to emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity breaks down as master-concepts because as it fails to

commit the same fallacy of assuming a common beginning place, or an “origin of presence.” As Derrida argues, “*Where and how does it begin...?* A question of origin. But a meditation upon the trace should undoubtedly teach us that there is no origin, that is to say simple origin; that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence.” Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 74. Italics original.

⁸⁵¹ Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction*, 199.

⁸⁵² This is similar to Forte’s argument for “...a space to open up with assertions of truth. The meaning of any truth claim is therefore never closed off or terminated in a hegemonic fashion, but always remains open for *the other* to emerge.” Forte, “The Ethics of Attainment,” 191. Italics original.

describe the operative function of how the conceptualization informs the religion. While it has been the analytical constraints of this study, emptiness and apophaticism cannot “themselves” be master-concepts because they resist substantiality through negation. That said, there is a freedom to compare the two religions because of the resistance of master-concept status: could all master-concepts in the two religions be called into question? Could terms like nirvana, salvation, oneness, samsara, grace, suffering, and forgiveness break down insofar as further dialogue with the terminology is needed? Furthermore, the deconstructive mode of religious language, as a resistance to master-concepts, would call into question binary oppositions as they apply to religious language: enlightenment/ignorance, heaven/hell might be further examined to include how enlightenment might be a (negative) transcendence because unity/emptiness is “experienced” in the same way that (negative) transcendence might bring a person closer to God with unity/no-thing-ness.

Once master-concept “status” has been eliminated from assumed religious authority, the bridges of comparison are possible in this space and time. The experience of emptiness in Buddhism might be comparable to the experience of unicity with God because a fullness/emptiness of the adherent transcends the self in space and time. But, is this possible as long as master-concepts dominate assumed religious language? Perhaps, but does it go beyond superficial description and compromise (namely, by that of the originator of the dialogue and his/her personal affinities)? The repulsion of master-concept status allows religious dialogue to occur as totalities and absolutes are purposely suspended.

The binary opposition of emptiness/fullness and apophaticism/kataphaticism bring together an interesting matrix of experience and internal religious logic. It illustrates something “other” in the experiential components in the religion insofar as the Buddhist who “experiences” emptiness “experiences” the loss of self, the awakening to the non-substantiality of all things, and the possibility of enlightenment as the Christian “experiences”

the loss of self, the awakening to the substantiality of God-as-such, and the possibility of unicity with God. There is a real comparison to be made here, in this space and time, in that the binary opposition of emptiness/fullness and apophaticism/kataphaticism because, as master-concept status is suspended (if even temporarily), then dialogue might occur because the emptiness and apophaticism of both oppositions play a vital role in both religions' internal logic. Emptiness shows the non-substantiality of all things, the illusion of the self, and the possibility of enlightenment of all sentient beings in a similar way that apophaticism not only highlights the idolatry of assigning characteristics to God, but also contributes to the conversation of what unicity with a God who remains hidden amongst God's-own self-revelation means.

Master-concepts probably cannot be relinquished in any kind of permanent way, but the temporary suspension of them helps show a place where comparison might occur, beyond the dogmatic and confining language of religious traditions.

B. Negativity: Methods of Examining Religious Language

This project has been an attempt to look at how negativity affects religious language, how it can inform internal structures and logic to that language, and how deconstruction can bring about new interpretations. Negativity is a powerful tool because it takes aim at idolatry and illusion, affirms the non-substantiality of things, and provides a method by which layers of meaning can be stripped away. The risk is, of course, that negativity provides another affirmation, a counter to what might be affirmed, and a hyperessentiality to something latent or hidden. This risk is mitigated by the possibility of stripping away those layers, of affirming a method by which something or no-thing can be discovered/disseminated/recovered/covered in religious language. Additionally, though deconstruction might be akin to analysis, specifically the deep (non)structures within

language, negativity provides a specific lens by which the fissure, splits, and gaps might be analyzed.

The conclusions of the Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna, namely the emptiness of emptiness, are striking where they convey a type of hyperessentiality, a “thingness” that goes beyond emptiness, but that which can only be apprehended with emptiness; the same charge can be leveled against the Christian thinker Eckhart who asserted an apophatic logic to describe the God beyond God. However, negativity pushes the paradigm here: both Nāgārjuna and Eckhart create a complex argument, nuanced by negativity that continues to pull away the curtain of illusion, to assert that the “somethingness” beyond what they are asserting would still be negative. Negativity stripped away does not necessarily lead to positivity; rather, negativity pushes the paradigm to otherness, infinity, a (negative) transcendence that almost seems closed behind a wall of mystical otherness. For thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Eckhart, negativity seems to be a linguistic structure by which that mystical wall breaks down, a method by which the “otherness” of the emptiness of emptiness and the God beyond God somehow transcend normal religious-language barriers.

The real comparison here is with the function of negativity in religious language. The illusion of positivity creates false structures for Buddhist and Christian thinkers; particular over-arching constructs like suffering/enlightenment and sin/salvation are framed in positivist ways by which the adherent might religiously experience transcendence. However, negativity helps frame the possible false illusion of this without superimposing another false construct; instead, negativity helps peel back the layers of illusion in a way that the religious language might be opened up to the other.

Thus, a rejection of master-concepts and a method of negativity both point toward otherness in both Buddhism and Christianity. As discussed above in the penultimate

conclusion of negative transcendence, otherness informs how emptiness and apophaticism might be framed in a comparative analysis of Buddhism and Christianity.

C. Otherness and the Language of Tomorrow: Religious Comparisons

Throughout this study, the suggestion that a look toward the future, toward tomorrow, is necessary for any kind of meaningful religious comparison, has shaped the internal logic. This means that while a search of origins, albeit linguistic, philosophical, or anthropological is useful, the assertion of the existence of a comparison at the origins is not historically, theologically, or philosophically demonstrable. Thus, a religious comparison must take on a different trajectory, one in which the future is open to dialogue and comparison.⁸⁵³ This is not to say that there is a lack of possible meaningful connections between the two traditions,⁸⁵⁴ but that a comparison of Buddhism and Christianity might find the apex of comparison in the openness to the future, to a language of tomorrow, of what is to come.⁸⁵⁵

More specifically, this means that Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism might find common expression in the common mode of negation, of the search for the nothing that is beyond the something, in the transcendent, in the negativity sublime. This also means that Christianity and Buddhism would be fundamentally open to the other, not

⁸⁵³ Caputo frames this quite well within a particular context: “Not the relative and foreseeable, programmable and plannable future – the future of ‘strategic planning’ – but the absolute future, the welcome extended on to an other whom I cannot, in principle, anticipate, the *tout autre* whose alterity disturbs the complacent circles of the same.” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 156.

⁸⁵⁴ David Loy suggests that Buddhism’s “...no mythical pure point of historical origin to which Buddhists yearn to return” in contrast to Christianity’s creation story might create a critical inability for comparison. Loy suggests that deconstruction helps bridge this gap, but he does not take the analysis far enough to explain how. Loy, “The Clôture of Deconstruction,” 62. Magliola gets closer a point of comparison, but then stops short of explaining how it might come together: “For the deconstructor, this is recondite allegory for what he calls ‘mise-en-abyme’: the infinite regression of a picture within a picture; and the plunge down through successive ‘bottoms’ which ogrify and collapse, each in turn, so that one plummets downward forever and ever and ever. In other words, when one pursues a metaphysics of Origin, each attempt to reintegrate Being, to reestablish a Ground, must inevitably result in yet another collapse. And the collapse of Origin means the collapse of all dependent holistic systems. I have argued of course that ‘mise-en-abyme’ need not be collapse into terror, but the ‘free fall’ into *śūnyatā*.” Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, 185. Italics original.

⁸⁵⁵ This is re-occurring theme in Caputo’s engagement with Derrida’s thought. He grounds it in the idea that “[t]he Bible does not think of time in terms of the enduring permanence of *ousia* but in terms of fidelity to the promise of something that is to come, even something a little impossible...[Derrida] is repeating religion with a difference, miming religious time nondogmatically, for this is a messianic time *sans* a Messiah, an apocalypse *sans* apocalypse, a religion *sans* religion.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 71. Italics original.

only for mutual dialogue, but also for philosophical and theological junctures which might challenge claims to exclusivity, authoritative dominance, and religious power.

What might be most paradoxical here is the juncture of two world religious traditions with the claim that they might be open to an unknown future, but also that they preserve their distinctive, unique voices. If a comparison of origins is undertaken, there is some sort of compromise made, something lost in exposing and silencing some voices from the past; however, if a comparison is made with an expressed vision of otherness and openness, the distinctive voices of Buddhism and Christianity might be preserved.⁸⁵⁶ Hence, what is lost here is a sense of authority over one particular vision of religious truth, but what is gained is the possibility of a multitude of voices, open and free to dialogue; as Gavin Flood illuminates,

...the important point is that religious studies' future lies in its developing into a critical endeavor that is in dialogical relationship with its object, the most important boundary here being language, or rather utterance in the social world, the contested area of dispute and the place where insider and outsider discourses converge.⁸⁵⁷

Does this mean that a comparison of Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism is firmly rooted in the future, in the possibility of dialogue?⁸⁵⁸ Yes, to a certain extent, but that is not the full force of the argument. The function of negativity in language today, in the historical, philosophical, theological inquiries made in this space and time, is necessary for the openness to future dialogue. However, that is also to say that there might be something learned by examining the negative function of language, as is hopefully illuminated above.

⁸⁵⁶ It is important to note that commentators like Gavin Flood support this type of thinking, the preservation of religious traditions in their own uniqueness, though with different terminology. For his part, Flood calls this a "[p]ost-colonial theory [that] celebrates difference, hybridity and polyvalence." Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 235.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid. 223.

⁸⁵⁸ The point here is to question the "use" of deconstruction as it applies to religious, especially comparative, inquiry. Caputo writes passionately about the potentiality: "Deconstruction is nourished by a dream of the invention of the other, of something to come, something absolutely unique and idiomatic, the invention, the in-coming, of an absolute surprise." Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 70.

IV. Future Work: Comparisons and Religious Texts

Establishing a methodology whereby religious traditions are fundamentally open to the future means not being able to clearly and definitively articulate a methodology for future work. However, there are working notes by which a methodology of comparison might be possible. The intent here is to show where future work might draw upon this project.

Throughout the text of this project, the deconstruction of religious texts is discussed within specific contexts, namely in emptiness in Buddhism and apophaticism in Christianity. There is much room left for analysis here, though, because the voluminous nature of religious literature lends itself to deep analysis, whereby the silenced voices might speak again, claims to authority might be challenged, and worldviews might be shaped and altered. This begs the question of what deconstruction to/in/for religious texts might mean; this is pure speculation, but it might mean that religious epistemology might be changed indefinitely. Religious knowledge, because it is shaped by texts, might undergo an ebb and flow of analysis that could well challenge long-held opinions, interpretations, and worldviews.

In another sense, this might be more akin to what Derrida calls a search for the impossible. There is something innately impossible about religious knowledge, whether that is defined as a search for God, Truth, or meaning. Religious knowledge is a search for the impossible, for what cannot be grasped by human intuition, so to that end, it is an appropriate “fit” for comparative studies.

What does this mean for the future of religious studies? With the dissemination of information occurring at incredible speeds thanks to technological advances, it might be stated that what is advocated for here is a turn back into the very texts that religions claim are “holy” or “sacred.” Deconstruction is not a tearing apart of these texts, but a deep analysis where multiple interpretations, divisions, meanings, and voices might emerge as free from authoritative claims of power: “Deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive

salvation, keeping it open to constant reinvention, encouraging religion to reread ancient texts in new ways, to reinvent ancient traditions in new contexts.”⁸⁵⁹ For, as this study has hopefully illuminated with a search of negativity in religious language, namely in Buddhist emptiness and Christian apophaticism, the possibility of comparison exists for the other, in a theology of tomorrow, in a realm of analytical possibility.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid. 159.

Footnote Annotations

- DP** Quint, Josef. *Meister Eckhart: deutsche Predigten und Traktate*. Munich: Carl Hanser. 1963.
- DW** German Works. *Eckhart, Meister: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, hrsg., im Auftrage der deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936.
- J** Jostes, Franz, ed. *Meister Eckhart und seine Jünger: ungedruckte zur Geschichte der deutschen Mystik*. Freiburg, 1895. Reprinted Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972.
- LW** Latin Works. *Eckhart, Meister: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, hrsg., im Auftrage der deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936.
- PF** Pfeiffer, Franz, ed. *Meister Eckhart (Deutsche Mystiker des Mittelalters Bd. 2)*. Leipzig, 1857. Reprinted Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1962.
- W** Walsche, M. O'C. *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, 3 volumes. London and Dulverton: Element Books, 1979, 1981, and 1985.

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